Kiss me, Night Mother

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Kiss me, Night Mother

by fangirlingisveryhard

Summary

The Colonel Jack Crawford from the Imperial Legion is investigating the murder of Vittoria Vici and he asks Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter for help. Thanks to theadventurouspancake for their inspiration.

"Meet the one who will help you in the investigation, Will". The figure stood up and Will found out he was an Altmer. He had met a lot of Elves in his life and he knew that their movements were fluid and light. But this one who stood in front of him was so graceful, he thought for a moment he was in the presence of a daedra. He shivered. The Altmer, who in the meantime was looking at him with a pair of amber eyes full of curiosity, held out his hand.

Notes

I am looking for a beta reader! If you are interested, contact me here.

If you have never played Skyrim and you are confused about something I mention in these chapters, check the Elder Scrolls Wiki.

Enjoy the fic and let me know if you liked it!

(Thanks to iwanttobeamangaka for her lovely advice!)

Bound Until Death

Chapter Notes

This chapter was beta'd by lestrade-di.

Under the warm rays of Mid Year's sun, an incessant chatter filled the courtyard of Castle Dour. People was laughing, while eating the delicacies made by the Imperial family's chefs, the best of Skyrim according to some rumors. Vittoria, the beloved cousin of Emperor Titus Mede II, wrapped in a white dress and adorned with a long red coat, stood in the middle of the courtyard. She had talked so much about her wedding day that everyone in Skyrim knew something about it. The celebration which would have taken place the 21th day of the Mid Year was on everyone's lips. Miss Vici would give up her hen to get married to Asgeir Snow-Shod, a North who had served the rebels of Ulfric for years. Considering Asgeir's past, the wedding would have been some sort of alliance between the Imperials and Rebels. Maybe that was the reason why it had attracted to Solitude a lot of people. But only a small part of them had access to the actual ceremony. The selection was tough. Victoria knew the Emperor was afraid something bad might have happened, especially because of the Civil War. But she believed that the party could be a perfect way to put aside everybody's worries and just have a good time. She was convinced of it, even when she noticed something unusual in the balcony in front of her. A snappy movement, nothing more. But he could swear that it was not an Imperial soldier and perhaps not even a civilian. She hadn't the chance to look better though. In fact, she had just enough time to raise her head and her eyes, wide open, saw nothing more.

Tirdas, afternoon

"Damn Stormcloak". The soldier Alana Bloom watched, with eyes full of tears, the lifeless body of Vittoria Vici. Expressing emotions was not considered appropriate by recruits, but the Colonel Jack Crawford decided not to make any comment about it, passing over the issue. The courtyard of Castle Dour was now empty and the festive noise of the previous hours succombed under the weight of a mournful silence. The sky was no longer blue and it had even hinted at a slight precipitation, as if the drama of the events had upset the atmosphere itself. Crawford approached the body of Vittoria Vici. Still in her wedding dress, still sitting on the throne wedding, still with the same smile.

"Damn Stormcloak and damned war," he repeated Alana. Jack kept observing the body blankly, while formless thoughts started shaping in his head. The Stormcloaks, the rebels of Ulfric, were heartless. People of low alloy that were recruited by leveraging their uncomfortable condition. Jack knew that; he had spent the last ten years of his life fighting them. He had studied them ("Know your enemy", they said), interrogated them, had talked

with them, pretending to be a rebel, as an equal. Jack knew them too well to realize that the terrible murder that had taken place that morning could not have been at their hands.

"She should have postponed the wedding. The Emperor should have warned her. Poor girl. Have the soldiers already reported back? Did they manage to find something out of Solitude? ". Alana was looking at him now, waiting for an answer.

"No."

"How could elude us so? Under our nose? We must question the men of the Legion, Jack. Right now we can not afford infiltrators or, worse, traitors. The emperor---"

"I do not think this is the work of the rebels". Jack interrupted Alana's train of thought, blurting bluntly what he had in mind. He approached the body, looking at the arrow that was still stuck in Vittoria's head. He analyzed it. It was a common iron arrow, but he could notice some anomalies in the tip of it. Just some black ink blots, nothing more.

"But it would not make sense, who else could have committed a crime so horrible? Killing a young woman on her wedding day and most in such a cold and brutal way!"

"That's the point. You are right, it is a cold and brutal murder. The accuracy and the coldblood with which they planned everything is inhumane. But it was all organized to the last detail: the arrival,the placement on the balcony, the escape. Nothing has been left out, otherwise the culprit would have been already in a prison cell waiting for the rats to devour him."

"Then who? Who would have a motive to justify such an action?"

"Look, I'm not saying I know for sure who the culprit is. I only have an idea and I do not even know whether it is right, I am just following my instinct. Have you ever heard of the Dark Brotherhood?". Alana shook his head.

"It is... a kind of legend. In short, it is not even sure that--- ", Alana opened her mouth, but Jack continued," Listen! It is said that members of the Dark Brotherhood are selected among the most ruthless of the empire. They must have the courage to kill without regret or sorrow, and, above all, they must be good at sneaking without being noticed. In the history of Skyrim there are many murders which have never been solved, and a lot of them are been connected to the Dark Brotherhood. And the more I look at this body, the more insistent is the idea that it is their fault."

"Then what are we waiting for? Send an army to look for them, do something!"

"It's not that simple! The Dark Brotherhood is a secret brotherhood. Often the members themselves do not know each other and finding them is almost impossible. Sure, you could trace the author of the murder somehow and get to the sect through him, but…"

"But...?"

"There's only one person that can help us do this". Jack watched Alana, waiting for her to understand. She had always followed his orders without questions, but he knew that she wouldn't agree to this. Jack was free to take decisions as he saw fit, but he somehow needed her approval

"You're not thinking about Will, are you?"

"The soldier Graham has the skills necessary to resolve this tangle. I know that the last time didn't end well---"

"Saying it didn't end well is an understatement! It was a disaster, Jack, and we can not make it happen again. I'm sure there will be an alternative or---"

"No alternatives, Alana. What do you prefer? Do you think it's better to put at risk the lives of who knows how many other people, to save the sanity of a single person? I'm sure even he wouldn't agree to that. Will Graham, despite his records, was a brave soldier. He always put the welfare of others before his own".

Alana seemed to reflect for a moment on his words. Then, faintly, she nodded. "Promise me one thing at least, Jack. Promise me you won't let him stay alone. Let there be someone else with him to follow the investigation, someone who can be a staple in the moments his mind drifts".

Jack sighed and his eyes fell again on Vittoria Vici, on her happiness that slipped away. The rain began to fall again.

The great dragon wings generated gusts of wind at every movement. The gusts were so loud that they covered the screams of the inhabitants of Helgen, who were fleeing in panic. Every corner of the village was on fire and WIll ran, his sword drawn and his forehead beaded with sweat. Behind him, his hands bound by chains, a rebel from the faction of Stormcloaks was trying to keep up with him. But his brain was clouded with fear and his movements were uncoordinated and slow. Will yanked him. As always, Ulfric had managed to keep his cool, even in the midst of the chaos and, once again, the Legion soldiers had lost him in the blink of an eye.

"Hurry up if you do not want the dragon to devour us". Will shouted to the prisoner, who whimpered and looked back with eyes full of terror.

"Will!". Alana's voice reached him, sweeping away for a moment the sense of loss that the chaos gave him. "Will, I'll take care of the prisoner, go to Jack now!". While Alana carried the rebel with her, Will picked up the bow he held behind his back. Jack was not far away from him, surrounded by other soldiers, while the dragon cast out of its tongues of fire. He

walked quickly. He reached a magician of the Imperials who was trying to hit the dragon with ice blades. Will preyed on that time to stretch and point the arrow on the body of the scaled black dragon above them. He was about to shoot, when the dragon moved his head and his eyes, the same color as the emerald, were upon him. It was as if his mind had been engulfed in flames, suddenly, and his thoughts themselves became burning fire.

"Zu'u Alduin". His voice rang out inside of him, every part of his body housed it. "Hin sil fen nahkip bahloki*".*

His head was burning as he felt the ground under his feet melt like ice in the sun, soil flowed like a river and an unnatural rage possessed him. When he opened his eyes (or maybe they were always open), the first thing he saw was the intense color of blood that covered his hands and uniform. The throat torn of the wizard next to him was what he noticed next.

** ["I am Alduin. Your soul will feed my hunger"]*

Middas, morning

Every morning, Will Graham, woke with a start in the grip of nightmares. He always dreamed the same thing, and none of the wizards College was able to take it off. He had not yet managed to get a room in the accommodation of the Arci Mages. He slept in one of many room of the Hall of Attainment. The cheerful noises of the students helped him to escape from the meandering of his thoughts. He reached upstairs for breakfast, while Winston, his faithful Familiar, wagged his tail by his side. The castle walls of Winterhold were his home now and the years spent in the Imperial Legion just a memory. Five years had passed since that fatal day in Helgen, when the fury of Alduin had taken possession of his soul. Five years since he had packed up and had sought refuge in the desolate Winterhold, sure that no one there would ever know of the atrocities he had committed. Yet, despite his new life in the College, where he was far away from weapons, blood and wounds, the nightmares visited him every night.

Winston barked loudly and Will realized that one of the students was looking at him. Still sitting at the table, the sweetroll before him left untouched, Will nodded his head inviting the boy to speak.

"Professor Graham, his lesson Evocation will begin in twenty minutes. Would you mind giving me a hand with the Bound Bow spell? I tried all night, but did not succeed."

Will nodded, trying to look as gentle as possible. Evocation had seemed the most suitable choice, they offered him a chair in Winterhold. As a Breton, Will juggled with great ability in different fields of magic. But he had a special bond with the creatures belonging to the Oblivion and evoking them for him was a breeze. He did not know the reason, but he was sure that it was his curious ability that made him lose his mind, that day in Helfen. His skill was a doom for him. Teaching Conjuration, anyway, was the best choice: he could exploit his skill while keeping it under control.

The arc evoked for his student was a blue ether. Light, handy, ready to be used. Will had not forgotten his real passion, what made him the best archer in the whole Legion. If only he could shoot that arrow that day to Helger, and hit Alduin right between the eyes... Without realizing it, the arrow evoked with magic ran away from the arc to stick in the huge wooden door that stood before him. The same door within seconds after it opened. Savos Aren, head of Arci Mages was looking at him.

"Will, there is a visit for you". Will was surprised. He was a loner and, especially since it was in the college, he hadn't maintained a correspondence with anyone.

"A visit? It is impossible Savos, I---"

"Is the Colonel Jack Crawford, from Imperial Legion"

The magic bow, which was still in Will's hands, disappeared altogether. A figure stepped forward, past Savos who still stood at the door. A Redguard, dark-skinned and heavy armor. Will could recognize those facial features with no effort. Abroad face, brown skin and an expression serious and formal as ever. Only a few more wrinkles, he noticed with surprise.

"Jack ...". Winston began to bark.

"My dear Will, it is a pleasure to see you again. They told me that your lesson begins in a few minutes, but what I have to say can not wait".

Will's expression probably changed, because Jack hurried to say: "Alana is fine, Will. What I'm about to tell you is confidential and... ". Will nodded, motioning to the student to leave. Savos waited to see him go out and followed suit, closing the door behind him. Jack went on.

"I came running from Solitude. Surely the news has not yet arrived here, but Vittoria Vici was killed."

"Vittoria Vici, cousin of the Emperor?"

"Her. One shot, precise, no smear. An arrow stuck on the forehead, between her eyes".

Will frowned. "You're not thinking...?"

"Absolutely not, Will. Even if you do not want to believe it, I know you and I know that you could never do such a thing"-

"After what I've done, I'm surprised you still have a blind trust in me. It's not like you, Jack."

"Will, as well as being one of my subordinate, you were also my friend, do not forget it. Of course, I also kept an eye on you through one of my soldier of the Legion, in all these years you've been here... ". Will smiled bitterly, but he had to admit he expected it. He was cunning and wise; not for nothing he had become a Colonel of the Legion.

"And you have no idea who did it?"

"Well, in the legion everyone seems to think it is Stormcloaks' fault and in fact it wouldn't be so strange, but I have a doubt that only you can clarify. You and, of course, your empathy."

"Jack, you know what happens when I put that mechanism in action. Trust me, it's better not to---"

"If I'm asking this it's because I need it. And I trust you, I wouldn't not put my army in danger if that wasn't the case".

"That didn't stop you from letting your soldiers check on me"

"Of course not, and I assure you that you will be controlled even when you're with me. You have nothing to worry about. If what I fear is true, we will deal with something certainly more dangerous than you. Will, I'm afraid that there's the Dark Brotherhood behind this murders".

"The Dark Brotherhood hasn't existed for a long time, Jack!"

"So they say. But there are studies that prove the opposite. Tons of books have been writtend about it and I assure you that the signs are clear. But I need you to confirm it first. Will, please. Follow me to the camp and I'll talk to you better about it, my soldiers will escort us and---"

"Jack, do not insist. That day in Helgen I decided to quit the weapons and the army, and I beg you to respect my choice. Beside, I do not have idea what you're talking about, I know nothing about the Dark Brotherhood. I can't be of any help. Now let me go back to class, my students are waiting for me."

Jack sighed. "The camp is not far from here. I will stay there for a few days because I have to deliver a letter. Take this time to think about it, Will. Think of how many other young people could be in danger, think of how much lives you could save---"

With a wave of his hand, Will silenced him and left the room.

Middas, evening

In the warmth of his luxurious mansion, Hannibal Lecter drank Skooma, observing the fireplace. He was tired. All the Evocation excercises he had done that day weren't effective at all. And the Skooma, which should have made things easier, didn't give him the effect he was looking for. That made him angry. He he had asked that smuggler to bring him the best Skooma in Skyrim, but that idiot really didn't kept his promises. Rude.

Raising his face, his eyes rested on a skull above the fireplace. It served as a vessel and held within itself a large amount of dried flowers. For many it was just a vase, an oddity in a house that was already pompous and full of glitz. For him, however, it was an object with a deeper

meaning. Only he was aware of a symbol drawn at the base of the skull, where it touched the marble shelf. It was a small hand in black ink, probably imprinted with a small stamp. Nothing more, no writing or doodling, only one hand. But Hannibal smiled at the thought of what that hand represented. And he knew that soon everyone would know nowthat his project was already coming to life.

A noise distracted him from his stream of consciousness. "Abigail".

A little girl, a long ancient dress that almost impeded her to walk, had just entered the room. Her face was angelic, her skin was pale like any other Breton and body slender and thin as if she had not touched food for centuries. And indeed that was the truth, whereas Abigail was a vampire. Hannibal was always amazed by how her eyes, so innocent and pure, could assume that typical redness whenever the bloodlust took over her. He had opened the doors of his house years ago, when he met her by accident in the Eastmarch, while she was searching for a prey. "I'm just a little girl", she had said, "the bandits have killed my parents and I ran away. Please, help me, please!". Rather convincing, Hannibal had thought. But the red veil over her eyes was impossible to hide. With time, Abigail grew attached to Hannibal as if he was her stepfather. Hannibal wasn't surprised: despite being almost three hundred years old, she had the body and the mind of a ten years old. And Hannibal acted as a stepfather. He had passed on his values, his knowledge, as any parent would. He had made her a real Lecter and she was grateful of it. They were studying Alchemy now, a field which Hannibal himself was a master of. It was for that reason that Abigail had entered her living room that evening, interrupting his thoughts.

"I finished the Virulent Poison, Hannibal. I wanted to ask you to check it to see if I was good enough". Abigail handed him a glass filled with a red liquid like wine and Hannibal reached out to grab it. Hannibal just needed to smell it and feel the nostrils burn to understand that his child had done a good job. He smiled.

"My dear Abigail, I could not ask for anything better". Abigail next to him sighed, as if she held her breath until then. Hannibal knew he had great control over her, and he appreciated it, since she was a creature of the Oblivion. These expression of his control made him in a good mood. "I think it's time to reward your perseverance, my little girl". He stood up, taking her hand, ready to reveal her what he had in mind for her, when there was a knock at the door.

"Yes?"

His servant spoke to him behind the closed door. "Mr. Lecter, a letter has arrived for. It has the Imperial seal on it, sir".

Abigail looked at him with a confused expression. Hannibal had no idea from who could it be. Just the day before, in Solitude, the emperor's cousin was killed, but the imperial dispatch was delivered around noon. He wondered if the two things were related. He opened the door and took the letter from the hands of the servant, wishing him good night. Before reading the contents he sat back in his chair and took another sip of Skooma. Then, after breaking the seal, he began.

Dear Professor Hannibal Lecter,

if my calculation are not wrong, you will receive this letter at Middas night. Therefore I'm sure you will already be aware of the facts that happened in the 21th day of Mid Year, in Solitude. Vittoria Vici, the young cousin of our beloved Emperor Titus Mede II, has died at the hands of a murderer who has been caught yet. But before I keep going, let me inform you: what I am writing is strictly confidential, so please do not to tell anyone else.

I am a Colonel of the Legion Imperial, soldier Jack Crawford. According to many, the murder of Vittoria Vici is the work of the Stormcloak. I was instructed to investigate further, and I am doing it, but there's thought that it is bugging me. I've read your books and one of the in particular struck me. It's the one about Sithis and the Dark Brotherhood. It was this that pushed me to write to you, because perhaps you might help me. I fear that the murder of Vittoria Vici was made by one of the members of the Brotherhood. Only you can unravel this skein and I can assure that the Legion right now needs the services of a wise Altmer like you. Services which, of course, will be rewarded: if you decide to help us, you will receive chests of gold, as well as the respect and gratitude from the whole Imperial family.

I will stay for a few days in the camp of Winterhold which is not far from your manor. If you are available to help us out, come. I may illustrate the matter in a better way.

Sincerely,

Colonel Jack Crawford

Hannibal's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. The murder of Vittoria Vici and the Dark Brotherhood? How could this Jack Crawford make a connection like this? He read the letter several times, focusing on the points where the Colonel had sung the praises. His narcissism was his only weakness and he was hard for him to resist someone who was willing to inflate his ego. He put the letter aside, aware that the events had taken a strange and unexpected turn. Abigail, who was still standing in the room, coughed. Hannibal turned to her.

"Where were we? Ah yes, your reward". He walked to the bookshelf and pushed on of the shelves as it moved silently, revealing another room. At the center of it, on a table, a pale, thin man with wrists and ankles tied kept whimpered.

"The butcher," Abigail said, her eyes fixed on him.

"It wasn't very kind of him to sell me rabbit legs of poor quality, don't you think? ".

Abigail smiled, her bloodshot eyes full of joy and her canines bulging. "Is he really all mine?". Hannibal did not answer, while Abigail approached the man, sniffing. Her stomach rumbled. She licked the arm of the prisoner and then she sank her teeth. Blood spurt out, covering her face.

"It's delicious. Thank you, Hannibal."

He nodded his head, then he wished her goodnight. It was time to pack up.

Middas, night

Matthew Brown’s steps echoed in every corner of the cave. Bedelia Du Maurier, standing by her huge desk in the main Hall, was waiting for him with a slight anxiety. Her tight black and red uniform showed off her muscular legs and bony shoulders and her gaze was like stone. She was beautiful in a scary way. Even if she hadn't show any tension, she had to admit that the deed of the day before had tested her nerves. When Matthew stood before her, he was still out of breath. He had run a lot to get there on time; He probably had not stopped even for a moment since he had escaped from Solitude.

"Bedelia". Matthew gave her a nod in greeting. His cheeks were scratched and dirty. Bedelia guessed he had fallen several times during his desperate flight. "Everything went as planned," he said in one breath, the enthusiasm drawn on her face.

"Is Miss Vicidead, then?"

"A blow to the head, as you had suggested"

"Did Veezara help you, as he promised?”

"His distraction was effective. The robbery at the central market was a brilliant idea. It distracted the guards long enough to let me climb on one of the walls and sneak away.”

Bedelia showed smug. Veezara was one of the best members of the Brotherhood and she knew she had made the right choice when she ordered him to protect Matthew at any cost.

"And once I was in the woods," continued the Dunmer, "it was impossible to find me. Exit Solitude was a breeze.”

"Do not flatter yourself for the speed of your legs. I won’t hide that I am delighted by how you managed to pull yourself away from such a dangerous situation. Veezara watched your back, of course, but you kept a cool head and I was not sure that you could.”.

Matthew's eyes showed a slight hint of disappointment. Bedelia opened a drawer hidden under the table and pulled out a tinkling bag. Gold coins. She threw it on the table. "Here's the reward you deserve". Matthew reached out, greedy. "I do not think I need to tell you that it is better not to depart from the Sanctuary in the coming days. I bet the Legion soldiers are already scattered throughout Skyrim".

"I'll do as you command, Bedelia," Matthew replied, lowering his head as a sign of reverence. "But... There's something I want to ask". Bedelia narrowed his eyes and waited for him to keep talking. "What we're doing… Okay, it was amazing. I was filled with adrenaline. I hope

I can kill a thousand times in the same way and in the same situation as yesterday, but... don’t you think it's too dangerous? It is the imperial family that we are talking about---”

"Are you questioning my will?”

"I would never, Bedelia. You know I'm always happy to accept your assignments and never I opposed to do your bidding. But I know you, you're a smart and pragmatic woman, and this thing is ... crazy!”

"Crazy but necessary”

"Necessary? Bedelia, since when you stand at the side of Ulfric? Our Brotherhood has never worried about political issues! We have not chosen a side in all these years---”

"It is not Ulfric that interests me". This was definitely the most truthful answer she could give. Matthew was right, she had never cared about the diatribes of the civil war. If it was Ulfric to rule, or someone else, nothing would have changed within the walls of her sanctuary. Yet she could not tell him the truth, because there was really something crazy in the whole thing. Someone, actually. A man who had poisoned her thoughts and her mind.

Since becoming the leader, Bedelia had avoided to mix ancient cults with Dark Brotherhood matters. She did not believe the stories about Sithis and its thirst for death that drove the minds of the members of the club. But the day Hannibal Lecter had whispered the right words that leads you into the Sanctuary, the day he had stood before her, with small, black eyes full of fury, that day Bedelia’s beliefs crumbled and became dust. Hannibal Lecter and his charm of a stolid man. He had her on that very desk where she spent her days on, organizing contracts for the Dark Brotherhood members. And while his powerful arms held her close to his hips, he whispered poisoned words that slowly killed her sanity. Hannibal Lecter, who called himself Sithis and Sithis really had inside. But she was the only one who could sense its presence. She couldn't forget when, between the moans of an orgasm, he told her: "You're the one I want, my Listener" and his voice echoed in her mind.

And Hannibal had asked her, as she was the Listener that he had long hoped to meet. He asked her to take part to one of the most dangerous and complicated mission: kill the family of the Emperor Titus Mede II and then the Emperor himself. "It’s Sithis who is asking you, can’t you hear?". And Bedelia nodded, because yes, she could hear her God asking her for help, so together they worked out the most effective plan.

But she could not tell Matthew this story. Se had promised absolute secrecy and she wouldn’t betray Sithis for the world. So she chose a lie.

"It is not Ulfric that I care about, really. The Imperials have committed too many crimes against the rebels. It's time for them to pay for their mistakes”

Matthew did not seem convinced. After all, Bedelia was not known for her good heart.

“Go rest now. These two days were tough for you. But do not disappear: you could get another job in the coming days. Good night, Matthew”. She doesn’t even wait to see him go out, and she blew out the candles on the table.

Turdas, noon

"Hey, stop! You can't go there!"

Will looked up and he realized that he had already reached his destination. The snow swallowed his feet and his hands were shaking even though he had tried to keep them away under the coat. Apparently he was so deep in thoughts that he didn't noticed how cold Winterhold was that day.

That morning, he causally heard a conversation between two studends. He was surprised to find out he was listening to the scary and chilling details of Vittoria Vici's death. He felt quite shocked. He felt even worse when, later, one of Arci Magi, who had met her in the past, told him how sweet and joyful she was.

How you can hurt a girl so young?, he thought, and he found himself wearing his coat, ready to get in the way to the Legion's camp. He truly hated his weird ability, his empathy that was a costant threat for his mental sanity, but he was aware that he wanted to help the Legion in anyway possible. Perhaps the time to put aside his fear had come.

The imperial soldier was watching him, waiting for an answer.

"I am Will Graham". The soldier continued to look at him. Will remembered the time in which no soldier would have given him such an inquisitory gaze.

"I am Will Graham," he repeated, "Colonel Crawford told me he would be here to wait for---"

"Will!". Not far from him, Jack, in his usual uniform, gave his widest smile. "I knew you'd changed your mind. Let him pass!"

The soldier stepped back and Will reached Jack. He greeted him with a pat on the back, something that made him stiffen. He was not used to open displays of cordiality, at least not anymore.

Together they crossed the camp and Will noticed how little he could endure the presence of a large number of people. Soldiers were busy running from one point to another, shouting orders and directives. In one corner, a blacksmith forged a sword hitting it with a hammer, making unbearable noises. WIll head hurt. Someone greeted him with a nod of their head, someone else shaked their hands gleefully. He almost regretted his decision: he already missed the quiteness of the Castle.

Before arriving to Jack's tent, they came across a wounded soldier. He was lying on a cot, moaning vehemently. Will's eyes rested on the wound in his left shoulder. The skin was torn, showing glimpse of the muscle underneath. Blood was falling down copiously, the snow

beneath him, tainted of red. Will's sight blurred for a second. It was impossible not to think of that day in Helgen and fear had already taken over him when they arrived at Jack's tent.

It was big and somehow cozy. There were bookshelves, chests, bedrolls. In the middle of the place, a big desk, with maps and candlesticks on it. Will noticed a figure, turned away from him. Someone, bent over a book, was reading in peace. The man was not wearing an Imperial uniform. His clothes were, instead, elegant and valuable. Perhaps sensing their presence, the figure tilted his head, but he didn't turn to face them.

"Meet the one who will help you in the investigation, Will". The figure stood up and Will found out he was an Altmer. He had met a lot of Elves in his life and he knew that their movement were fluid and light. But this one who stood in front of him was so graceful, he thought for a moment he was in the presence of daedra. He shivered. The Altmer, who in meantime was looking at him with a pair of amber eyes full of curiosity, held out his hand.

"Mr. Graham, Colonel Jack told me everything about you. I am Hannibal Lecter, its a pleasure to meet you".

Will accepted his hand. Hannibal Lecter's grip was so firm that it wiped away his anxiety. The Altmer, his eyes still on him, and then he sat down again, motioning him to do the same. "I confess I have never heard of a skill like the one you have".

"Well, I don't think it is worthy of note, anyway". Will glanced at Jack. He didn't appreciate when people introduced him as a freak. Jack, getting the message, started talking about his past as soldier. Lecter listened, while Jack praised him in every way possible, and Will felt even more embarrassed.

"I didn't walk an hour in the snow just to hear your praise, Jack", he said. Then, realizing that it wasn't kind of him, he added: "Thank you, anyway". Jack nodded.

"Well, it's time to talk about the reason why you're here, am I right?". He took out a file from a drawer. It would be a long day.

Bound Until Death II

Chapter Notes

Hello to everyone!
First of all I want to apologize because it really took me a while to post this new chapter.
Even if the story is almost all written, I had a hard time editing.
Nevertheless, I'm sure you will still found grammar mistakes and misspells. You are allowed to yell at me in the comments below.
I hope you will enjoy the new chapter.
I swear I'll be quicker next time!

Turdas, evening

The whole camp smelled of roast. The soldiers, with coarse movements, had gathered around the fire to eat. Hannibal sat among them, in a secluded corner. In front of him Colonel Crawford. Will Graham was sitting right next to him. Crawford was engrossed in a deep conversation with one of his soldiers. The guy was telling him news about the murder which took place a few days before. Jack watched him with a contrite expression. The whole matter really concerned him. They had spent the whole afternoon talking about the murder. Official Crawford had showed them the guests list, he had made them read the testimonies by some soldiers. He was trying to stimulate their brain in order to solve the mystery as quick as possible. But, in truth, Hannibal had heard very little. His interest was in fact directed to the man he had met hours before, Will Graham. He was listening to Crawford carefully. Nodding from time to time, clutching his eyes when blood was mentioned. Hannibal noticed that the word made him paler, so much that at first he thought the man was a vampire. But he soon realized it was not the case: the cold breeze made his cheeks flushed. Hannibal found him peculiar: his movements were unrefined, but there was some sort of gracefulness hidden behind layers of inelegance. Brown curls framed his light and beardless face. His eyes were big and blue, and he lowered his gaze time someone spoke to him.

"...You had heard about him, right? Mr. Lecter? ". Hannibal came back to reality, immediately after hearing his name. "I am talking about the murders in Windhelm. The murders of the butcher, as people used to call them. Never been solved".

"Do you think it has something to do with Vittoria Vici's death?"

"I think the Dark Brotherhood is awakening and we must stop it before it's too late, 'cause we are all in danger. That's what I think".

"Well", said Hannibal, "I do not agree with that. The Dark Brotherhood isn't awakening. I fear that it was never dormant in the first place. It is an old organization, as you know. Not

only it can count on a lot of members, it also own a plethora of money. They can move without being traced, because there is always someone to corrupt---"

"There aren't any corrupts in the Legion!", Jack interrupted him, raising his voice just a little.

Hannibal smiled. "It was not what I meant".

Will was listening, absorbed. He was a man of few words, a quality that Hannibal was fond of. He was toying with the food on his plate. His expression was focused, as if he was trying hard to order his thoughts. He opened his mouth, from time to time, as to say something. His red lips parted and stayed so for a while. Then he sighed and returned to his piece of roast. At some point, though, he spoke. "I guess the crime scene could tell us something".

"Are you suggesting we should go to Solitude?", asked Jack.

Hannibal saw Will's face changing. He guessed he had already regretted having opened his mouth. All of a sudden, he really wanted to go.

"Well" Hannibal began, "we can not find out the truth if we stand here, in the camp".

It was strange what had happened since he had laid eyes on Will Graham. Nothing else had seemed noteworthy. He even forgot he was there just to extract informations from the Imperial Legion. Everything was swept away by this man, to the point that Hannibal was willing to put in danger not only his plan, but himself either. And he couldn't understand why.

Will had stopped toying with his food. Hannibal sensed his tension. So he added: "If that is acceptable for you both". Then Will raised his head and his eyes met Hannibal's. It was just for a second, but it was enough for Hannibal. A warmth spread from his chest, awakening his sense. An increasing awareness grew in him, filling him. For years, he had wondered if Bedelia Du Maurier was the right person, the Listener he was looking for. Now, looking into the bright blue eyes of Will Graham, he might have found the answer.

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?" Will turned towards him again. Not looking at him, this time.

Fredas, noon

Alana Bloom couldn't breathe. The air was heavy in the Hall of Dead of Solitude. The fact that room was dark and full of people wasn't of any help. The body of Vittoria Vici lied in a coffin that had not been closed yet. Almost all the citizens had come to give her a final farewell. Some of them put a flower in one of the golden plates at the foot of the coffin, some others just stopped by to observe her, in a moved and reverent silence. Officially Alana was there to guard the body. In truth though, Jack had ordered her, before leaving to reach Will, to keep an eye on the guests. He had asked her to report everything she might have considered

suspicious. Alana guess he hoped to find the killer among them. What if he came to check the result of his deed? Alana, though, knew that those things happen only in books. But she didn't question him in any way.

Next to him, some of her subordinates were whispering together. Alana coughed loudly several times, in an attempt to make them stop, but she didn't succeed. One of them sniggered.

"Soldier Price!". The soldier replied to her reprimand with an apology. Alana looked at them, unable to understand how could they keep it cool in such a critical situation. They were all in danger. The civil war had gone on for years and neither side could have been considered in the lead. It was as if they fought by inertia: Alana sometimes did not even remember why it all started. She just had grown up knowing that the Stormcloak were the "bad guys" who needed to be defeated. But the murder of Vittoria Vici was, without doubt, the most horrible attack that was ever stroke during the Civil War. Neither the rebels nor less the Imperials had never come to that. Alana was aware that this event could have changed the destiny of the war. She also couldn't help but fear for her, for her friends and for her colleagues. Who knew how many soldiers would die, who knew how many of her faithful companions she would say goodbye to? Like it happened that day in Helgen, when she saw Will Graham in the middle of the battlefield, covered in blood. She could not forget his eyes hollow and his gaze fixed while she, with trembling fingers, went for his pulse making sure his heart was still beating. Trying to let him catch his breath, she had placed her lips on his. She did not know that kiss turned out to be their first and their last.

Now that Jack was with Will, Alana's anxiety grew. Even if they haven't talked in years (Alana feared he had forgot about her), she still cared for him. What Jack had thought for him could break him forever. But he trusted the Colonel and she couldn't afford to question his orders.

A noble woman entered the room. It wasn't the first time Alana had seen her. The first time she noticed her, the woman was walking in the yards of the Blue Palace. She was related to the Jarl and she had recently moved to Solitude, maybe in order to help miss Vici with the wedding preparations. When she entered the room, her face streaked with tears. Alana looked at her and, at the same time, the woman turned to reciprocate the gaze. She did or say said nothing: not a nod nor a greeting. The only thing she did was keeping crying in silence. f ever Alana had had suspicions on her, they had vanished under the gaze of those eyes full of sadness.

"Poor lady Verger," said Lieutenant Katz, who was now within her reach. "She was so fond of her".

Fredas, afternoon

The carriage stopped in front of the grand entrance of Solitude with a hard braking. Will, still sitting, his eyes half-closed, his face towards the sun. Unlike the cold and gloomy Winterhold, the Haafingar Hold shone, especially that sunny afternoon. Will could not help but enjoy the gentle breeze that caressed him. That way, with his cheeks flushed, he was trying to stave off the discomfort he had felt for the whole trip.

They left at the crack of dawn: Jack, Hannibal Lecter and he. Will had spent hours avoiding the gaze of others, looking at the surrounding nature, which became more lush and colorful as they approached Solitude. Jack actually had seemed lost in thought and he had not particularly bothered him. Hannibal Lecter was the one who made him nervous. He had held in his hand a roll of paper and a charcoal for almost the whole trip. Will had seen him drawing the sketch of stag and he was amazed by the amount of details he added, considering that Hannibal was drawing from memory. His long pale golden fingers hue were moving fast but gracefully on the sheet of paper, almost as if they were being guided by a creature of the Oblivion. Sometimes Lecter had looked up from the paper and direct his gaze towards him. Will had responded to that settling into his seat, moving his leg. He had also coughed in an attempt to let everyone know how uncomfortable he was feeling. But Hannibal kept going, while his eyes hit the side of Will's face. Even now, as he stepped down from the carriage making his way between the guards of Solitude waiting for them, he felt those amber eyes fixed on him.

After talking to some soldiers, Jack returned to them, reporting what he had been told . The body of Vittoria Vici was displayed in the Hall of dead, in order to allow people to pay their homage to the Lady.

"When you're ready, Will," said Jack, "we can reach the Hall".

Will nodded. The idea of being in front of the corpse of a young girl waved it more than anything else, but he wanted to address the issue as soon as possible.

"Well, follow me". Jack then went on, approaching a group of soldiers who were now waiting for orders.

The doors of Solitude opened and Will filled his eyes of its beauty. He suddenly realized that he had missed it. Everything was as he remembered it: the main square, full of people, illuminated by a radiant sun; Noster Eagle-eye, always standing outside the inn to beg loose change to buy a drink; children chasing each other. Will looked up at, towards the Imperials outpost where he had lived for years. After the events of Helgen, he had packed up and left so fast that he had not even been able to take a last look at what had been his home for a long time. Yet his mind had kept every little detail of that place.

"You missed it a lot, I suppose". Hannibal was at his side, watching him with a smile. Will looked at him just for a second.

"It's been a long time since I came here. Yet my memories are so vivid".

"Our memory is a wonderful tool, Professor Graham. It helps us, especially when it's all we have instead of a view".

They walked through the market and the smell of food filled his nostrils. And then the secondary square, and the well around which he had played for hours with Winston. He smiled at the thought.

"Is there a particular reason why you decided not to come back?" asked Hannibal. "From the way you look at every corner of it, it seems you were very fond of this city".

Will thought Hannibal was now being intrusive. "It's a long story" Will declared, just to shut him up. He was then relieved to see the sumptuous door of the Hall of Dead: they had arrived at their destination.

Inside, the air was heavy. People, with their heads bowed and a distraught expression on their face, were silent. Will looked around, trying to spot Jack somewhere.

"Will...". A female voice uttered his name, almost in a whisper. Will turned his head in the direction where the voice came and he felt his stomach twisting. Alana Bloom, in her imperial uniform, was looking at him: her bright blue eyes were huge, wide open. The nostalgia took over him like a cold wind. Her face, more deflowered than the one that lived in his mind, brought with it the scent of wildflowers that invaded the camp during the imperial springs, the sound of cicadas in summer, the color of the rain in the autumn, the cold fingertips during the fighting in the winter. Alana, the fixed point of his life in the army. He could not imagine those years without her. Yet escaping without giving her a farewell had been too easy. Will didn't smile, but he looked at her and through his gaze he told her everything.

Hannibal let out a cough, looking to bring them back to reality. "Has Colonel Crawford warned you about our arrival? We are here to see the body of Vittoria Vici "

Jack peered from behind a door. "Come along, the funeral is over here".

The shoes that Victoria Vici was wearing were certainly the most elegant shoes that Will had ever seen. They seemed to be made of moonstone and they were dotted with small garnets. They showed two thin and pale ankles. The white dress was crumpled at the base, but it was intact around the waist. On the bust, upon which two slender hands rested, he noticed a few drops of red liquid, which became abundant on the chest and then disappeared, leaving the neck clean. The lips were only a slit on the face and her eyes were wide open, but they didn't show fear. And then the blood, the putrid injury and a hole in the skull. Will got dizzy and he realized that everyone was looking at him, perhaps waiting to hear the whole truth about the murder, like he was some kind of a foreseer. But he did not have any answers to their questions.

"Will, if you do not feel well...", Alana began. But Will did not listen to what she had to say because he did not need her compassion. He just needed to do what he was told to. Nothing more, nothing less. Vittoria Vici's breast swelled, as she took a deep breath and sat up, and all of a sudden it was no longer dark around him. It was sunny, and there was a bow in his hands.

“I must attend the public wedding reception of Vittoria Vici and Asgeir Snow-Shod and kill the bride”.

From the highest balcony he could observe everyone without problems. He was not afraid that someone might detect him. He had managed to escape the control of the guards thanks to someone who was helping him and he knew he could still count on that same person. Vittoria was enjoying her moment of glory, dispensing smiles to almost every guest that was attending the ceremony. Next to her, the groom. He had the face of an idiot. Too bad he couldn't kill him as well, it would have been an honor.

“I must kill the bride and I'll receive a bonus if I kill Vici as she addresses the crowd”.

He could have waited for people to go away, after all. It would have been easier to hit her. People always shout and creat chaos in situations like these, it's annoying. He could have waited and waited. He could have reached her in her bedroom, during her wedding night. He would have found her undressed and flushed, between the sheets, the rough hands of that idiot on her. It would have been so nice to gut her in that very moment and see the expression of dismay on her husband, unable to react. But orders were orders. Victory had to be killed during the wedding reception. And he would receive a bonus, if he did.

The elvish bow was already in his hands. He settled, trying to hide himself in a better way. He already knew which way he should taken in order to run away from there. He had studied for day the map of the castle. He had even considered different ways to kill Miss Vici. Eventually he had chosen the bow, perhaps in a attempt to leave a signature. He aimed the arrow.

“I will kill Vittoria Vici, the Emperor's cousin, at her own wedding, and everyone will assume it's related to the ongoing war”.

But the civil war had nothing to do with that. He wondered if anyone would ever find it out. He himself did not know it yet the real reason behind this actions. He was killing and he had no idea why. Poor, sweet Vittoria Vici. Her face will be so beautiful when it will be kissed by death.

The arrow hissed. And in the exact moment she turned her head towards him. He did not even had the chance to enjoy the show, because the crowd started screaming as expected and the only thing that was left to do was run.

"The Emperor will now be forced to visit Skyrim to deal with the aftermath, paving the way for His assassination ". And they were waiting for him.

Someone was shaking him up. Will opened his eyes, slowly. He could still feel the pressure of the bow on his fingers. He realized that he had clung to the coffin, but he was still standing and this was a good sign. At least he hadn't passed out completely. Alana was next to him and she was looking at him, worried.

"...Are you okay?", she asked him, almost shy, as if she was afraid of hurting him. Will thought he wasn't probably looking very well. Will nodded, trying to smile. He felt

exhausted. The adrenaline caused by the vision was still running through his veins. "I saw... something".

Jack sighed, relieved. After all, that was the reason why he had brought him in Solitude. The colonel took a chair and let Will sit down. "Tell me everything" he said, laying a friendly hand on his shoulder.

Will told, in a few words, about his vision. Around him, soldiers listened to him with curious. Will could bet they had never heard about someone who had these peculiar skill.

"They want to get to the Emperor", Jack said in the end. "Maybe I was wrong then. Perhaps it's the rebels who are behind the assassination".

At that point, Alana intervened. "Asgeir Snow-Hod was a Stormcloak. Yet the murderer wanted to kill him too".

"You said well: he *was* a Stormcloak. If the murderer is a rebel, he would have felt compelled to kill a traitor".

"The point is" said Will, "that he did not. He was following orders, as I said. And they had nothing to do with Asgeir or former rebels in general, but only with Vittoria Vici."

"Well, whoever it is, it's confirmed that the Emperor's life is at risk. We should warn him as soon as possible..."

As Jack spoke, Will felt increasingly weak. His vision clouded and his hands began to tremble. He noticed Hannibal Lecter, who was almost hidden by Jack. Lecter was looking at him with a smug. He hadn't asked any questions. Then he felt another wave of dizziness.

"Jack, if you do not mind I'd like to go to bed", he said.

Jack agreed, and he invited him to rent a room at the Inn. "A temporary arrangement", he added soon after.

Will got up. Then he heard Hannibal's voice. "Colonel Crawford, I think it would be better if I went with Professor Graham. He doesn't look very well. I'm afraid he might feel sick during the journey". Just after that, he was right behind him.

Fredas, evening

“You should eat something”.

The sun had set. It was cold now, but the walk to the Inn was nice: Solitude was even more beautiful under the stars. Will, who was walking next to him, was silent and Hannibal did not

want to upset him further. He wasn't fond of trivial conversations had just to fill the silences, he knew that now, and Hannibal respected it.

Still, he was curious. He wanted to know more about the vision he had, but the questions that Colonel had asked, to whom Will replied exhaustively, did not quite satisfy his curiosity. After all, at that point, the assassination interested him very little. Will's mind was a mystery as intricate as the one that revolved around Vittoria Vici's death.

While wanting to indulge in the silence that Will used as shield, he could not help but notice how much skinny the boy was. The black tunic he wore didn't hide his thin arms and narrow waist. He had the small body of a woman. Hannibal remembered how, the night before, Will had toyed with his food as if he was trying to hide the fact that he wasn't actually eating anything. He wondered how long it was since he last ate properly and he almost had the instict to tie him to a chair and force feed him.

Now, in the warmth of the inn, while Will was renting the two rooms in which they would sleep, Hannibal exposed his thought, perhaps thinking he could convince him to take a seat and have a dinner with him.

"You should eat something or you'll risk to lose clarity of thought. And you don't want that to happen either, I believe".

Will rolled his eyes and sighed. "I don't know what Jack have told you about me, but I don't need anyone to take care of me".

“I’m sorry. Observing is what I do. I can’t shut my mind off any more than you can shut yours off. Why don’t we sit down and order something for dinner?”

The inn-keeper handed two keys to Will and he gave one of them to Hannibal. "The Imperial Legion will take care of the expenses for the room. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go".

“I would apologize for my analytical judgement,” said Hannibal, before Will turned around to reach his room, “but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you’ll tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly”.

Will paused to observe him. Hannibal noticed his eyes changed colour in the candlelight. “Just keep it professional”, he said eventually.

“Or we could socialize, like adults. God forbid we become friendly”.

“I don’t find you that interesting”.

Hannibal smiled at such biting remark. If only Will had known…

“You will”.

Bound Until Death III

Chapter Notes

Yes, I'm still writing.
No, I haven't given up.

Well, maybe I should, who knows? Writing is hard but I enjoy it so much that I don't even care if I suck (and let me tell ya, I do. And no, that's not an understatement).

I'm trying my best. I wanted to tell someone and this blog is the only place where I feel comfortable to do so. I am writing something, I struggle in putting a sentence together, but I am trying really hard.

So please, be patient. If you come across my fic on ao3 and you realize it's horrible, please know that I put effort on it, that I spent hours trying to make words and sentences working the way I wanted them to. And feel free to hand me some advice.

Thank you!

Loredas, dawn

Bedelia had spent two days riding her horse Shadowmere, hoping to be able to speak with Hannibal as soon as possible. With Vici's murder, she had started the Dark Brotherhood down a path they had not traveled in centuries. The fear of not being able to run such a difficult business had taken hold of her to the point that her faith had almost succumbed. Therefore, immediately after meeting Matthew, she had climbed atop her ruby eyes horse, heading for Lecter's properties without a second thought.

She was eagerly waiting, when she knocked on the manor's door. Her heart was beating faster than usual. She knew that the very sight of Sithis would make all her doubts vanish. She kept knocking, but no one came to open the door. She looked around: Hannibal's horse was still in the stable and nothing could make her think that he had left. Her blood froze thinking that something could have happened to him. No one actually could connect Hannibal Lecter's to Vittoria Vici, but Bedelia knew that when Sithis was at its peak, its strength was unstoppable. Almost like a black hole. And like a black hole, it devours everything around it. Bedelia feared that Vittoria Vici's murder, something that Sithis wanted more than anything, had set in motion a mechanism that could have put them all in danger. At that point, only a glance would have been enough to notice that not only Hannibal had an evil side, but that he was the evil itself.

She knocked again, louder this time, and eventually a figure peeked out the door. It was wrapped in a thick black coat, that covered every part of its body. It did not take long for

Bedelia to figure out who it was.

"Abigail, where's your master?"

"Hannibal is not my master. Come in, or I'll really burn". Abigail closed the door once Bedelia was inside. She threw down the black coat and Bedelia smelled a faint odor of burnt skin. Bedelia had never been a vampire, but she knew that the excessive sensitivity to sunlight happened only after a severe abstinence. Abigail hadn't drunk blood in days. And that was weird, considering Hannibal was in charge of feeding her.

"How long has he been away?"

"About two days".

Noticing Bedelia's alarmed expression, she continued: "He is fine."

"The mission we are now taking is one of the most dangerous I have ever faced. He would never---"

"He would never? What do you know about what he would never do?"

Bedelia didn't bear Abigail's impertinence. Even years ago, when Abigail had visited the Sanctuary for the first time, she had been witty. Jealousy would have devoured the soul if only she had one. Bedelia decided against annoying her further. She followed the girl in the living room and asked for something to drink. When Abigail handed her a glass, she saw it was Skooma. The smell reminded her of the nights spent with Hannibal, while he, on his knees in front of the fireplace, did his best to summon Sithis. She took a sip of it.

"I am worried. About him". Bedelia decided to simply say it. Abigail sighed.

"Hannibal can take care of himself".

"Where is he now?"

"Oh, he left a note. The Imperial Legion has asked for him".

Bedelia gasped. "Is he in danger?" was all she could think to ask.

"No. Why should he be? He received a letter from this guy, a colonel. It was full of praise. He left soon after".

She didn't understand. Hannibal wanted to join the Legion, but it did not make sense at all. After all, she was in charge of the whole operation. Hannibal had told her that. Not to mention how dangerous the whole thing was. Even if he needed more information, she could have asked her. The Brotherhood's members would have been more than happy to help, willing to infiltrate the Legion to gather all the information Hannibal needed. Bedelia felt hurt because only one thing was immediately clear: Hannibal did not trust her.

"You and Hannibal...", said Abigail suddenly. "I know what you two do when you spend the night here". Bedelia looked at her, puzzled. What was her point?

"I may seem like a little girl, I know. But, in truth, I'm a little girl no more than you are. I know quite a few things on your... experiments, as Hannibal called them. Summoning Sithis is something that no one had tried to do for centuries. I myself would have considered it something crazy if it wasn't for Hannibal. When I met him for the first time I realized he wasn't a common Altmer at all. I suppose it's also what you have experienced, am I right? ".

Bedelia did not answer, but she continued to look at her, speechless.

"I could have taken part in it too, you know? Indeed, I could have taken your place. It could have been mine, the hand that held the knife. But I never did, and you know why?"

"Because you're not the Night Mother".

Abigail smiled. "Neither you are".

Bedelia tried to keep her composure. She was the Night Mother, she was sure of it. She could feel it. And those allegations were nonsense. But she kept it to herself. "How can you tell?", she just asked.

"It's been years since the first time you came into this house, years since the first ritual of evocation. And what has changed? Hannibal has Sithis within himself, but has he never manage to get it out?"

"That is just because we have not offered the right souls to Sithis. But now that our goal is the imperial family---"

"Oh, that... It's just personal revenge, you should know it".

Abigail smiled again when she saw how lost Bedelia was. "He didn't tell you, did he? How strange. What kind of relationship do you two really have? You're his listeners, but do you really listen? ". Abigail went one step further and reached her hands out. Her cold finger touched Bedelia's neck, right where the artery is. Bedelia stood. "He sent me a letter yesterday. He was heading towards Solitude. You will find him there."

Bedelia gathered her things. Her head was spinning now. She had a thousand questions in mind and Abigail's presence was now unbearable. She needed to see Hannibal again, to know that he was safe and to feel safe through him. Before leaving, however, she wanted to ask the vampire a last question: "Why didn't you take part in the rituals then?".

Abigail, still in the living room, the canines now visible because of her relentless thirst, only replied: "Because I'm no one's toy".

Loredas, morning

Jack was sitting at his desk in his castle's quarters. He was re-reading some details of the evidence and, in the meantime, he was waiting for Professor Lecter. The episode Will had the

previous night had upset him. Will had proven himself capable, once again, to provide details that only his intuition could reveal, but Jack did not expect that kind of reaction. Alana had even reprimanded him, within the limits imposed by her rank in the Legion, and Jack could not even blame her. Will's mind had always been unstable and Jack knew that stressing it couldn't be a benefit for him. Yet they need him and sending him home was out of question. Talking to Lecter was the last thing left to do. He had invited him to take part in the investigation just because he knew deeply about the Brotherhood. But Jack appreciated the way he followed Will the day before, almost worried about him, making sure he arrived at the inn safely. Jack thought that maybe the professor could work as Will's lifeline. So he decided to ask him something, sure that such a wise man could recommend a better approach, just to avoid unsettling Will's mind again in the future.

Lecter was announced by a soldier and Jack ordered to let him in.

"Good morning, Colonel", Lecter greeted him. "May I ask you the reason of your call?". He sat, his face relaxed, with a hint of a smile.

"Of course, of course. First of all, I'd like to thank you for taking part in this operation. I haven't had the chance to do it before, unfortunately. I wanted to offer my gratitude".

"I am always happy to put myself at the service of the Imperial Legion".

Jack handed a sweetroll to Lecter, but he refused politely.

"I am happy to have a cultured person like you in the team. I thought, however, that you might help me out with something else. Do not misunderstand me, the information on the Brotherhood that you provide are going to be useful, and they are the main reason I requested your presence. But there is another issue that concerns me right now. An issue that has to do with... Will Graham".

Hannibal kept looking at him, impassive.

"You see, Will Graham is a... peculiar person. Here, in the Legion, the soldiers used to say he was too sensitive to be in the army and in a sense they said the truth. To be honest, he shouldn't have been part of it at all, but years ago Stormcloak's strikes became almost uncontrollable and the Legion needed new men to recruit... Anyway, despite his incompatibility with weapons, Will was always able to tell us what the enemy's next move would have been. We couldn't do without him. And I still can't do without him, especially now. But I fear it is too much for him to handle and his reaction yesterday was a proof".

"What he has is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine, and maybe some other points of view that scare him. It's an uncomfortable gift, Colonel".

"Maybe we need to find a... less direct approach, if you know what I mean. That's why I called you here today. I couldn't help but notice a certain chemistry between you two. So I'm sure you can help me out".

"Of course I can. Perception's a tool that's pointed on both ends. This murder you have him getting to know... I think I can help him see his face".

He wanted to go away. The sleepless night he had experienced was a clear sign that his mind was not stable enough to deal with what Jack asked him to. He had stared the stone roof for hours, tossing and turning in bed, unable to find a position that was comfortable enough for him. His back ached as if he was lying on a bed of stone. The few times the sleep seemed to defeat his restless mind, a spasm shook his body. It was much worse than the nightmares that he usually had, back in the College. Those were just a succession of confused images and sounds that woke him up, the next day, making him feel tired and debilitated. This time, what he kept seeing as soon as he closed his eyes was vivid and real. The face of the murdered girl, the sound of the arrow leaving the bow that he was holding in his hands. *I did not kill her* , he repeated to himself, as if he had trouble remembering it. Not that he did not know it with certainty: he acknowledged his innocence. But those few times, that night, he lost control of his thoughts that night, just right before slipping into the unconsciousness caused by sleep, the girl's face appeared before his eyes and, at least, for a second the idea of being the author of the murder was almost a certainty. Intrusive thoughts, which he struggled with for years. He had even learned to handle them, at some point. But the stress caused by the vision he had the day before was so intense that it brought down the precarious balance he had built his life on.

Shortly before it started to dawn, he made the decision. In the darkness of a room he knew little of, he slipped into the bag of moose hide the few things he had with him (Jack had suggested to bring only the essentials and to buy the rest of the stuff in Solitude: the Legion would have paid for that, too). He repeated in his head what he would have said to Jack. He feared his reaction, although he knew that he could not force him to stay, since he was no longer a member of the army. But Jack could be quite persuasive, not to say insistent. He sat on the bed for at least a few hours, watching the sun slowly rise and flood the room with light. He finally decided to speak with Alana, sure she would understand as she always did in the past, and he left the room with his backpack.

He avoided heading to Castle Dour, worried about meeting Jack or some soldier who would drag him straight into his chambers. He decided to go to the Hall of Dead, where Vittoria Vici was still exposed and, again, he went through the market square, full of people, as it always was at that time of the day. He passed by the fishermen who had come to sell their wares captured overnight, he made his way with difficulty among hunters shouting the price of their products, and then he spotted two women talking in a corner, near the city walls. One of them wore a light blue dress and a hat of the same color, from which brown curls fell. In front of her, leaning against the wall, a soldier listened to her talking, eyes fixed on her. Alana. Will stood still, looking at her, unsure about what to do. She seemed so focused on the other woman that he thought it was better to go away and let her do it. But then she saw him and waved her hand. Then she took leave from the noblewoman (Will later noticed the gems that adorned her dress) and joined him.

They had not yet had the opportunity to talk and Will soon discovered he was feeling nervous. Then she took the initiative and started to speak, probably aware of his

embarrassment.

"It's good to see you."

Will smiled, looking down.

"I wanted to tell you yesterday," she said, "but there were too many people around us. When Jack told me he was going to contact you I didn't know how to react. Part of me was really pleased with his decision".

"Well, I can not really say the same thing".

"...You're talking about yesterday, right? I knew this would happen. In fact, as I said, a part of me was happy, but... Will, I only can imagine how difficult it must be for you"

"Quite".

"You look so worn. Did you sleep last night?"

Will shook his head. "I have nightmares sometimes...". He limited himself to that, trying not to arouse in her a pity he did not desire. "Look, Alana, I came here to tell you that maybe... maybe it's too much for me to handle. I was wrong to think otherwise. I only did it because I felt it like a duty, but it is better for me if I go back home. Now, you know how insistent Jack is, maybe you can talk to him---".

"Will, please, don't give up on everything just now. We need you! The girl I was talking to, Lady Verger, is Vittoria Vici's cousin. You should have seen her frightened eyes. She is afraid of being the next victim, Will, and who knows, she might even be right". She put his hand on Will's shoulder. "I assure you, you won't get too close. Jack promised me that and I will do everything I can to let him not forget it".

Will did not answer. He let out a long sigh and he felt torn.

"Why don't you ask Professor Lecter for help?", Alana asked, candid.

"...For help?".

"Jack told me that he is a great Alchemist. Maybe he can give you something to get rid of nightmares".

How many Alchemists, how many magicians and sorcerers Will had met and how many had promised a speedy recovery thanks to extraordinary potions and spectacular magic. Nothing changed eventually. Will was tired of undergoing these experiments as if he was some kind of a freak. "I do not think that Dr. Lecter can do something for me...", he replied. But then he looked at her and he saw how much she cared. He didn't know exactly which words the woman told her, but they softened her in a way she wasn't used to. Alana never got involved that much in other's tragedies. "...But I'll talk to him" he concluded, and her face lit up again.

Will was smiling now, feeling slightly better. After all, he could make an effort for a few days, hoping that the issue would be resolved in no time.

"I'm sorry I didn't even say goodbye, that day" he said suddenly. There was something unresolved between them and Will thought it was better to discuss it as soon as possible.

"It's been a long time!", she said, dismissing the whole matter.

"I know, but I really mean it. I am sorry. And I would add something else, but I'm not good with words, so I hope you can settle for that".

She laughed and nodded, looking into his eyes. Then someone, behind Will, called them.

Hannibal Lecter and the Colonel stood in the middle of the crowd. Jack in his usual uniform and Lecter, with a long black tunic, with gold trimmings, which showed off his broad shoulders.

"My dear Will," Jack said, "we were looking for you. I hope you are feeling better this morning! I am going to interrogate someone and Professor Lecter was willing to join me. Are you two busy?". He smiled and then he invited them to follow him. Lecter was looking at him, without saying a word. Will did not know if he was really a good Alchemist as Alana had claimed, but he was for certain one of the eeriest person he had ever seen. And if someone would have asked about him, that was the only thing he could have said about him. Yet no one around him seemed to think the same.

“Why him? He is just a local thief, after all”, Will asked while they were descending into the Castle Dour’s dungeons.

“There are thieves and then there is Gulum-Ei. No honor, no code at all. He'd shake your hand and stab you in the back at the same time”.

The Colonel took them in a dark and dirty room, with leaking roofs and damp in the walls. He could barely breathe. Inside, a group of soldiers was focusing on something. Hannibal could only see their back.

"I have no business with you. Leave me", said a flat voice.

"Easy there, Gulum-Ei! The Colonel is coming", one of the soldiers told the voice. Just after that, Crawford announced his presence. The soldiers stepped aside, giving Hannibal a chance to see better who was talking. An Argonian was sitting in a corner, his arms tied behind a chair. Jack took a stool and sat in front of him, giving him an inquisitive look. Hannibal, soldier Alana and Will placed themselves in the back of the room.

"There's no filthy business here in Solitude that you haven't taken part of." Colonel Crawford showed a sarcastic smile. "Robberies, smuggling... It's always one the name that thieves give when they are too afraid of the torture chamber: Gulum-Ei. Gulum-Ei!".

"It doesn't seem a good reason to accuse me of murder", he said with a serious tone. The Colonel laughed, mockingly. Then his eyes became serious and frightening.

"Where were you on Tirdas morning? Where were you when Vittoria Vici was killed? I asked around and, coincidentally, no one has any idea. A little suspicious, isn't it?".

"I was probably in the warehouse".

"And no one can confirm it, right? ".

The questioning went on for a long time. Soldiers, including Alana Bloom, had gathered around the Argonian in order to hear better his words. Will was still close to him. Hannibal decided to make use of the opportunity and talk to him.

"May I ask how you are today or should I be afraid of a bitter reply?".

Will give him a polite smile. Even so, it was the first time Hannibal saw him doing it and he appreciated the view. He smiled back.

"To be honest, I could feel better. Nightmares".

Will turned his attention back to Gulum-Ei. Hannibal paused to look at his tired eyes surrounded by deep dark circles. He did not seem particularly upset. His expression was quieter, completely different from the one that he had shown the day before. A clear sign that the Argonian in the room was giving him no vision. But he had something in his mind, Hannibal could tell. He examined him. For some reason, he felt confident that sooner or later he would have said something more. And he did, eventually.

"Alana thinks I should try some potions". Hannibal looked at him, pretending to be confused. "For the nightmares, you know?".

"And what do you think?"

"That potions do not work on me...".

"Questionable".

"...But that maybe I should give them another chance".

Hannibal gave him a smirk. The matter was taking an unexpected turn. He could take advantage of the whole situation, he thought, but he needed to be careful.

"You're a great Alchemist, or so they say".

"I am an Alchemist" he said, showing off his false modesty. He kept gazing at him, waiting for him to find enough courage to ask for what he had in mind.

"Look, I don't want to drag it out. Do you think you could help me with some potions? A Potion of Enhanced Stamina could be enough for now. I would be ok for a day or two. I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't---"

"Why not trying something more specific?"

"Because, as I've already said, nothing really works on me".

"I DID NOT EVEN KNOW HER!". Gulum-Ei's hiss grew stronger.

Crawford had no intention to give away. "And do you think anyone would believe that? You didn't know Vittoria Vici, the Emperor's cousin?".

"Jack," Will interjected, stepping forward. "I do not think he has to do anything with the murder".

Crawford, meanwhile, continued with his pressing questions, ignoring Will. The man stepped back, shaking his head.

"Who has got this idea into his head?" He whispered, while Alana got close to them.

"I don't think Jack believes Gulum-Ei is guilty of murder", she told him. "We have been monitoring him for quite some time. We believe that he could be part of the Thieves Guild".

"According to the legend, the Thieves Guild is closely linked to the Dark Brotherhood", Hannibal asserted.

"Exactly. Some actually believe that the Guild and the Brotherhood are the same thing. Perhaps this Argonian here can help us".

Hannibal observed Gulum-Ei. Alana Bloom was right: the Argonian could really help them. But not for the reasons she thought.

He had never met a Shadowscale before. Many claimed that they were completely extinct. However, it was possible that some Argonians did not even know about their own identities. The ones born under the sign of the Shadow, in the distant Black Marsh, were Shadowscale: inclined to stealth and combat; great assassins. Many of them abandoned their land when they were still in diapers and no one told them of their unique abilities. How much talent lost... No one could have been better than them in carrying out the Dark Brotherhood's orders.

Gulum-Ei, in the meantime, kept protesting his innocence. He appeared unperturbed, never losing his cool. Colonel Crawford soon would have realized that he had nothing to do with any of it. The Argonian repeated once again, in details, how he spent his time the day Vittoria Vici was killed. While he reported it with an absent voice, his eyes fell on Hannibal, who was still standing in the back of the room. All of sudden, he stopped talking.

"What is it, Gulum? You can't remember anymore the lies you told us before?".

But Gulum-Ei did not speak. His attentions was entirely directed to Hannibal. He didn't even blink anymore. Hannibal had met some Argonians, in the past, in Windhelm. Still, for him, they were a mystery. He couldn't understand, for example, their origins: what was behind their complicated names that sound like grunts? What gods did they pray? Their Pantheon, in particular, was an enigma. An enigma that he had tried to unravel with years of study. One

thing he was certain of: every Argonian born under the sign of the Shadow was devoted to Sithis.

Gulum-Ei did not listen to Crawford anymore but to him he spoke, when he was caught by a sudden and inexplicable tremor. "Hail Sithis!", he said in a whisper.

"What did you say?".

Gulum-Ei breathed deeply. Then he shouted: "HAIL SITHIS! HAIL SITHIS! ". He shook and writhed uncontrollably and kept shouting. Crawford stood up from the stool where he was sat and looked at him in disbelief. The other soldiers in the room did not wait a second longer: they grabbed Gulum-Ei and took him away. No one, in that chaos, had paid attention to Hannibal's smirk.

"What the hell was that?" Crawford asked, still incredulous, his eyes fixed on the door that was just closed. They could still hear Gulum's screams.

No one answered. Everyone was trying to understand what they had witnessed. Then Will leapt to the door, muttering a hoarse *sorry*. Hannibal could not help but notice the trembling hand clutching the handle of the door, before Will disappeared completely from his view.

Breaching Security

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loredas, night

The dark hood over her eyes did its best to hide her face. The Inn was a cozy place: a bard was playing in a corner, people with glasses filled with ale toasted and laughed. Bedelia had forgotten how good such a place could be. She stopped for a moment in the doorway, letting the warmth wrap her. But it aroused some suspicion, that dark hooded figure, standing in front of the door.

"Everything all right?". An unknown male voice had spoken to her, but the cap didn't let her see the man properly.

"Staying safe, I hope," said a woman who was with him.

The voice continued: "Only burglars and vampires creep around after dark. So, which are you?".

"I'm a traveler, I need to rent a room".

Bedelia avoided raising her head. She instead hid better under the hood, covering even her blond hair. That way they would have had trouble recognizing her race.

The man remained silent for a while. Bedelia could see the tip of his boots and the hem of a red uniform. He was part of the Imperial Legion, for sure. "Stay out of trouble," he said eventually and then he walked away, followed by the woman.

Bedelia began to fidget. Solitude was the headquarter of the Legion and, although she was usually capable of sneaking without any problem, soldiers were on alert, considering what had happened days before.

She reached the counter, trying to keep a slow pace and hide her nervousness.

"Welcome to The Winking Skeever, friend."

Bedelia tightened her coat around her and took a deep breath.

Finding the door of Will's room wasn't that difficult. Hannibal had asked the inn's owner for the room number after dinner, worried because he hadn't seen the boy in the main hall that night. When he got back to his room with leftovers, which he settled on a tray he found on his bedside table, he began to search for something inside a trunk he had brought with him.

Among a pile of books and a few robs, Hannibal found a series of bottles that he had carefully chosen the night he had packed: the Potion of Enhanced Stamina was one of them. In truth, he wasn't very happy to give Will the potion he had asked. He didn't believe it was a good idea at all, but the reason was pretty selfish. The potion could help Will strengthen his body and his mind, but Hannibal, who wanted to creep in the depths of such an empathic and fragile brain, needed him to lower his defenses almost completely. He considered for a moment the idea of adding to the potion the powder of a Giant Lichen, which was somewhere in the trunk as well. He would have weakened his psyche and Hannibal would have got the chance to play with his mind at least for a few hours. In the end, he decided that it would have been better to gain Will's trust instead of scaring him, thus holding the tray and the bottle, he left the room.

When Will opened the door, a few minutes later, he was wearing only underwear. He didn't make it a big deal, though. With his scruffy and messy hair, he glanced at the potion that Hannibal held in his hands and he gestured him to sit. Hannibal watched his thin body while Will sat on his bed without bothering to wear something.

"Is it the potion that I asked for?". Hannibal put the bottle on the nightstand next to him.

"Yes. And I brought some food too, I hope you don't mind. I didn't see you at dinner. It is not recommended to drink a potion so strong under fasted conditions".

The boy got out of bed and move towards the table. Then he reached out to grab a piece of chicken breast. He thanked Hannibal with a mouth full of food.

They were pretty close now. Will's smell caught his attention: it was a sweet but intense. It reminded Hannibal of the Deathbell growing in piles in the bushes around his house; it was the smell of an affected and feverish mind.

Hannibal took a deep breath, letting Will's scent to pervade his nostrils.

"Did you consider what I said before?", he asked then, looking Will who was avidly drinking the potion.

The boy sighed. "You are not the first alchemist who tries to... fix me. You know that, do you?"

"We can always try. What do you have to lose? ".

Will stared blindly at the wall in front of him. He shrugged, almost a hard admission.

Hannibal was right and Will was giving in.

"Earlier, in the cell... You seemed upset."

Will snorted. "Upset... Poor Will, there's always something that upsets him".

"I didn't mean to offend you".

Will laughed again and shook his head. "The Argonian has nothing to do with the murder if that's what you're thinking". He sat on the table, the muscles of his abdomen contracted for the movement. "And, trust me, I'm sure of it. It was that name..."

"Sithis?"

"Yes. Even now that I hear it, I almost cringe. It's strange. I had never heard it before. Does it have something to do with the Dark Brotherhood?"

"In a way, yes. It is said that once the Brotherhood obeyed only to Sithis's orders."

"Is it a Daedra then? An Aedra?"

"It is a deity. Talking about him would be like telling you the cold of space, or terror of midnight. Sithis is all those things. He is the Void".

Hannibal was pleased to notice Will was looking at him with some interest.

He wanted to say much more, but he decided to gloss over the issue for the moment. It would have been too risky.

"Interesting. Perhaps the Argonian is really involved. I'd like to know more about the matter, by the way. It could help us with the investigation".

"In that case, I have some books with me that could turn out to be helpful. If you want, I can show them to you. We could meet tomorrow and, if you let me, we can work together on a potion for you. What do you think?"

Will hesitated, then he nodded. On his face, this time, there was no trace of annoyance that he had shown previously, every time Hannibal was nearby. Instead, curiosity lit his eyes.

Hannibal had got what he wanted. Feeling satisfied, he took his leave, wishing Will a good night. Soon he was back in the corridor, reading numbers on the doors, till he found the right one. Will's interest towards Sithis fired him up. Soon he would tell him everything about what Sithis was able to do. He could imagine the exact moment when he would give him a real demonstration of Sithis' power. And the ecstatic expression of Will's face would be priceless.

So, still fantasizing about it, he opened the door of his room and he returned immediately to earth when he realized that Bedelia was sitting on his bed waiting for him.

Hannibal just nodded his head. He took two glasses, he poured some wine in each of them, then he handed one to Bedelia, who couldn't help but stare at him. Hannibal raised the glass, made it clinked against hers.

"Just like the old times," he cheered.

They drank, in the breathing silence of the room. Bedelia perceived Hannibal's discontent. There was a certain tension in his face and gestures.

"It's dangerous". Bedelia uttered the words with all the firmness she could show in front of Hannibal. The man, meanwhile, moved towards a trunk and bent down. Bedelia realized he was looking for books. Whenever he took one out of the chest, he leafed through it and if he found it relevant, he would set it down on the table. Otherwise, he would throw it back in.

"I am aware of the consequence of my actions, Bedelia", he stated, dismissing the whole argument. The woman didn't really agree, but she knew Hannibal enough and so she decided to change the subject. Arguing with someone with such a tenacious temper would only be counterproductive.

"I met Abigail".

"Oh, little Abigail. How is she?"

"She sassed me away from your manor".

"That girl!"

Hannibal got up and piled the books he had chosen, muttering a "these will do". The dark suit, finished in leather and gold, made him look even more imposing. Seen from behind, his broad shoulders were almost inviting. Bedelia resisted the temptation to run her hand over them, holding onto the folds of his robe.

"You arriving here. That is something dangerous".

Bedelia said nothing. She lowered her gaze and focused her on the empty chalice still clutched in her hands.

"I suppose there is a serious reason behind your decision to come" he continued. "Indeed, I really hope there is".

Bedelia shook her head.

"I've been waiting a long time for this. Seeing my plans go up in smoke because of your concern would be inconvenient. Concern which is, by the way, groundless".

"I thought I would be taking care of everything. I thought you would ask me. But you came here to Solitude without telling me".

Hannibal turned to her, his eyes locked on her now. "My dear Bedelia...". He smiled while saying her name. Such a reassuring smile. "I would never put your life at risk. I feel protective of you".

Bedelia felt heartened by his words. She almost felt stupid for doubting him. She was her Listener. Of course Hannibal wanted to protect her at all costs. Yet Abigail's words bugged her. A whisper, nothing more; a reminder: she wasn't important to him. The thought had tormented her throughout her journey to Solitude. And now, not even Hannibal's presence managed to calm her down. She tried, however, to set those thoughts aside, at least for a moment.

"Besides, there is nothing to fear. To be honest, my staying here is proving fruitful. I met a man, a professor at the College of Winterhold. He's nothing like me, we see the world in different ways. Yet he can... take my point of view".

Bedelia held her breath. Abigail's voice wasn't a whisper anymore. She was screaming inside her head now. "How has he demonstrated that?", she asked in a hushed tone.

"He's demonstrated the capacity".

From a drawer, Hannibal took a purple bottle, small as his fist. When pulled the cork from it, the smell of its contents reached her nostrils. It was the second time that day she smelled that. Skooma.

"It's nice to have someone see us," he spoke again. "Or have the ability to see us. It requires trust. Trust is not easy for me".

"You can trust me". Bedelia said it as a matter of fact, but there was some tremble in her voice. Did he really know it?

Hannibal drank the Skooma in one gulp. Then he got close to the bed where she was sitting, and he leaned towards her. His kiss was almost an assault. He bit her lips and his tongue while the bitter taste of Skooma invaded her mouth. The addictive substance made her kiss him with more vehemence, making it rough. Hannibal groaned. He climbed on her, biting her jawline and down on her neck. He caught her hand then, rubbing his lips over it. Bedelia didn't even noticed the scalpel he was holding. The incision in her palm was neat and painless. Blood began to fall down, staining the robe that she was wearing. She ran her wounded palm on Hannibal's cheek. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as blood instilled in him the strength he needed. The flames on the torches swayed as if a gust of wind had suddenly entered the room and Hannibal's maroon eyes became dark as pitch. Bedelia's doubts were swept away in no time. She alone could admire the face of Sithis overwhelmed by lust. She was the only person in Tamriel who was blessed by the great Deity. She was the Night Mother.

She whispered Sithis' name several times, as she crept under his robe, now unbuttoned. She rubbed against his crotch. And Hannibal, with his eyes closed, breathed:

"Sweet mother, sweet mother...".

He had used salt to draw a circle on the floor of his living room. Around the circle, at each of the compass points, he had placed a black candle. The smell of Nightshade's dried petals, burning in a thurible not far from him, filled the room. There was smoke everywhere. Hannibal, shirtless, wearing only a pair of leather trousers, stepped into the circle. He positioned himself at the center of it. He crossed his legs, he relaxed the muscles of his neck and shoulders and adjusted his breathing. Bedelia, a black dress that showed her ankles, handed him a black velvet cloth, careful not to cross the border drawn with the salt. Wrapped in the cloth, a bottle of Skooma, that Hannibal himself had distilled a few days before. While Hannibal was drinking, Bedelia stood still before him. Frozen, like she was made of marble.

"It is my intention to evoke the immense Sithis" Hannibal whispered, "because thanks to his spirit I will experience the power of hatred and death".

Bedelia sang then. Her voice started as a low murmur. She recounted Sithis and his grandeur. "Before Him was nothing," she said while following a spontaneous tune, which she had not studied anywhere. A melody that perhaps she had never heard before.

The sound crept into Hannibal's soul. He felt in the darkest corners of his mind. The name of Sithis multiplied and echoed within him. And it was fear and it was the scream of a sinner.

He was running. He found himself in a maze, and the darkness covered everything that was around him like a veil. Bedelia fled, barefoot, the black dress rising in a nervous movement. He followed her. And he called.

"Turn around, turn around. The sea rages". He only had to reach out.

Bedelia was holding a heart and she offered it to him. "He will eat flesh", she sang and Hannibal bit that piece of raw meat and felt full. "He will drink blood". With a scalpel, she cut his wrists and she offered hers, already dripping with blood. And Hannibal drank and quenched his thirst.

Desire was all he could feel. He was desire himself. Bedelia's song was a lament and a supplication. "Sithis... Sithis...". She almost fell to the ground. He prostrated herself before her God. And he grabbed her, and he gave her what she wanted.

She went through the circle and she fell upon him. Hannibal tore his robe. She was wet. The smell of her sex was driving him insane. When he put his fingers inside her, she screamed and she was all a tremble.

Like that, her legs clenched against his hips, she rubbed herself against Hannibal's body and grabbed his antlers. But it lasted only a moment.

An invisible force threw them far away from each other. The candles died. Hannibal, his back against a bookcase, was now himself again. He noticed Bedelia who was lying unconscious on the floor, across room. He hissed then when he started to sense the pain caused by the wounds. And then he said to himself: "It is not the right moment. Not yet".

With his arms behind his head, Hannibal was lying on his bed. Bedelia, instead, was sitting on the floor next to the bed and she was bending over him. She drew circles on his hairy chest with her fingertip, but her breathing was deep and steady. She was about to fall asleep.

Hannibal couldn't bring himself to loathe her. Not out of love or deep affection. It was the devotion she had towards him. It blinded her. If she, in her everyday life, was able to show some common sense, when it came to Hannibal, it disappeared altogether. He felt a swell of pity. After years of rituals, which also involved a tiny amount of self-harm and pain, she had never realized that she was not the real Listener. She had instead believed Hannibal deeply and she didn't even dare to question his authority on her. For those reasons, she had proved herself as a useful alliance that he hoped not to lose.

"It's time for you to go," he murmured and she replied with a sleepy *hmmm*. "It's still dark outside and, if you're careful, you can sneak your way out of it".

Bedelia turned to him and then got up. For a brief moment, it was like she was fighting the temptation to kiss his lips before leaving the room. But eventually she must had changed her mind because she vanished without even saying a word.

Sundas, afternoon

Will was sitting on the grass. The sky was a deep blue and Kart River, in front of him, flowed noisily. A break. It was all he needed after all. And he hadn't allowed himself to have one since the day he left the College. Resting on his legs, one of the books that Hannibal had lent to him. He had knocked on his door just before lunch, holding a stack of ancient tomes, which didn't look very promising for some reason (worn, yellow pages and dirty leather covers), and a basket. Hannibal told him that in the basket there was an unpretentious lunch he had prepared for both of them.

"We could eat it by the river", he had suggested.

Will, who didn't usually enjoyed having company, especially at lunch, had accepted without reserve. In truth, he said yes because he hoped that those hours with the man would prove fruitful for the investigation. He sacrificed himself for the greater good. He had also helped him carrying the books, in an attempt of being nice. He murmured an awkward *may I?* and Hannibal replied with a gentle smile, handing him the load.

He was at his third attempt of reading now. Every time he tried, something would interfere. The first time it was Hannibal's fault. Not directly, though.

He was going back and forth, in front of him, and he was writing notes in a notebook. The main reason he brought Will there was to work on the potion. He kept searching for ingredients on a small book and, if he found them interesting or useful, he annotated their names on the notebook. Every now and then, he lifted his head and asked some questions ("Bleeding Crown maybe?"), to which Will always replied in the same way: "I've already tried it".

The second time it was the turn of a seagull who fled upon his head. Its shadow passed over them and it was huge and imposing and it reminded Will of what he had seen in Helgen. He wondered if Hannibal had ever seen a dragon, if he knew how strong and terrifying a dragon's voice could be, if he had ever heard it. He didn't ask. It was not his business after all.

Then, he got distracted by a fisherman. The man was on the other side of the river and Will observed him. The way the man moved, the way he held the fishing rod in his hands... It was all very annoying. He snapped eventually and shut the book loudly.

"He won't make it!"

Hannibal looked up from his notebook, a frown that was a question.

Will put his hands to his face and rubbed his eyes. "Sorry. It's that fisherman. It irritates me somehow".

"Fond of fishing?"

"More or less. I haven't fished in a while. I learned as a child, in the Iliac Bay, in High Rock. I kept doing it here in Solitude, during my years in the army. But after moving to Winterhold fishing was just something I did only in my fantasies".

"You are in Solitude now. You may renew your habit".

Will shrugged. "Quitting again would be too painful, I guess".

Hannibal sat down next to him, on the fresh grass. "What is wrong with that fisherman?".

"He's not focused enough. You... You have to connect to the fish. The fish is in the current, you're connected to the river. Have to be still. Have to be close. Have to think clearly, control your emotions and act efficiently. Never let the fish know you're fishing". He turned to

Hannibal. He had listened to him carefully, such a concentrated expression he was wearing, as if was weighing Will's words more than he should.

"What is your passion, Mr. Lecter? Besides Alchemy, I mean".

"Culinary arts", he said, extending a hand to indicate the basket he had brought with him. Will chuckled and nodded. The food was delicious, he couldn't deny that. Art was an apt word. "I draw, sometimes. And I do research".

"About the Dark Brotherhood? That is a... peculiar hobby. Weird, if I may".

"It's fine to be weird". Hannibal's smile was warm.

"Where does such a weird hobby come from?"

"It was an interesting subject, complicated and mysterious. Where does your passion for fishing come from?".

"A solitary hobby for a solitary boy, Mr. Lecter".

Hannibal gave him an intense look. "You can call me Hannibal", he suggested.

Will did not answer to that. He glanced at him and then he opened up the book again.

"So... Hannibal, tell me more about the Brotherhood".

The guards pushed back the crowd who gathered under the stage in the main square of Solitude to see what was going on. Some bards had announced that Jarl Elisif would have made an appearance to give a speech. It was rare that the nobility left the Blue Palace to speak directly to the citizens and the news had attracted many onlookers.

Alana reached Jack in the crowd, asking for an explanation. The Imperial Legion had not received any order, no one had informed them about the decision of the Jarl. In truth, the nobility was under the protection of Solitude guards. There wasn't any particular reason why they should be warned in situations like these. But rumors spread fast and Alana wasn't used to be in the dark.

"Your guess is as good as mine". Jack said as he tried to shield himself from the over-excited people who pushed and shoved him.

Lady Margot walked on the stage. Behind her, other members of the royal family. She looked worried, Alana noticed. She eyed the crowd like she did not know what to do. She was

probably right. When she spotted Alana, a hint of a smile appeared on her face and she waved her hand.

"I hope it hasn't anything to do with the war," she mumbled.

"We would know".

"What if the Jarl suddenly decided to stand on the Stormcloak's side?".

Jack frowned as if he had just heard a heresy. But the look on his face slowly changed and became more serious. However improbable, Alana would not be that surprised. Those were hard times, people acted according to unusual logic.

Examining the crowd, Alana saw two figures approaching. They were two men, one taller than the other, and they were engaged in such a thick conversation that they didn't even notice what was happening. Then one of them looked around and stopped walking. His half-open mouth showed his disbelief.

"WILL!", Alana shouted, trying to get his attention. They walked towards her. Will's cheeks were flushed, as if they had been exposed to the sun for a long time. The man next to him, whom Alana recognized as Hannibal Lecter, had ruffled hair. It was curious for someone as formal as he was.

"What happened?", Will asked.

"I wish I could know myself. The Jarl is going to give a speech, but about what we don't know".

In that moment, they heard a trumpet. Elisif the Fair, Jarl of Haafingar and widow of King High Torygg, took the stage. She was greeted by a big round of applause, to which she replied with a modest smile and a polite bow. She had never been an influential public figure and, particularly after her husband's death, she had never shown a great deal of leadership.

"My dear subjects," she began. The crowd cheered and then fell stunningly silent. "As you know Solitude is facing dark times. The war is putting a strain on us. Our borders are secure, but at the cost of the guards for our towns and roads. Moreover, the Stormcloaks are far from the only threat to the hold. The roads are beset by bandits and beasts... and now there's even talk of murders". The crowd grumbled. The Legion had tried their best not to cause panic among people, but after that speech, it would be an even more difficult task. "But I had an idea that might help to bolster the morale of our people in this difficult time". I was just informed that the Emperor Titus Mede II will soon visit Skyrim. We will welcome him with a grand parade!"

The crowd cheered again. The prospect of being able to enjoy a week of parties and games was thrilling, especially for subjects disheartened by the fear of war. Nevertheless, it would have been too much of a threat. Alana eyed Jack.

"This is bullshit", she heard him saying.

"I thought we warned them. I thought we told them the Emperor was in danger. His entire trip should be canceled! Why didn't they follow our orders?"

"This is bullshit", Jack repeated. "A parade would make everyone an easy target. It's insane!"

"Commander Maro", the Jarl continued, "from the Penitus Oculatus Outpost, was assigned to handle the Emperor's safety. General Tullius had told me many good things about him and I am sure that both the Emperor and the whole city will be safe during the parade. In the coming days, we are to expect a visit from Gaius Maro, the Commander's son. He will make the necessary arrangements to ensure that everything will work out for the best. I beg you, my faithful subjects, to cooperate with him. Be well. Pray for Solitude, and my husband". And with another awkward bow, she bade farewell to the crowd.

Sundas, night

Bedelia could barely stand on her feet. She was exhausted. When the doors of the sanctuary swung opened, she dragged herself inside. She walked through the corridors and looked around, searching for one of the Brotherhood members. Her fatigue wasn't enough to stop her from doing her job. Eventually, he was the one who found her.

The Dark Elf looked at her with his piercing red glowing eyes and bowed his head in reverence. "Bedelia, I have news for you".

Bedelia motioned for him to follow her and they headed to her bedroom. The Elf talked again. "Someone told me Commander Maro from the Penitus Oculatus Outpost was assigned to handle the Emperor's safety during his staying in Skyrim".

"Great. Now we have to find a way to keep him out of the way".

"Yes, and I have something in mind. How do you think the poor Commander would feel if his son were to be killed in an unpredictable ambush?"

Bedelia smirked. She liked his way of thinking. After a few clarifications on the matter, he was ready to go. She gave him a bag of septims and wished him good luck. Then, before going to bed, she added something.

"Matthew", she said. "There's something else I need from you"

"Anything, Bedelia".

"After the murder, the Imperial Legion will send someone to investigate. Hannibal Lecter will probably be one of them".

"You want me to keep an eye on him?".

"Yes. And I want you to get me personal information on the man who is working him. He is a professor at the College of Winterhold, so he shouldn't wear an Imperial uniform. Be careful and do your best".

Chapter End Notes

Will smells of Deathbells because Agneta Falia in the Herbalist's Guide to Skyrim wrote about them: *"Folklore abounds about this flower found in the swamps of Hjaalmarch. Some stories claim it grows where unfortunate deaths have taken place, others insist it grows first and then lures unsuspecting people and animals to their doom."*

Breaching Security II

Chapter Notes

I still don't have a beta, so I am sorry if this chapter turns out to be messy and nonsense.
But I'm not an English native speaker and, trust me, I am *really* trying my best.
If you are still reading my fic, let me thank you for your support and for believing in me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morndas, dawn

Leaning against a tree, Matthew wrote and wrote in his journal. He had made the decision of writing a record of what had transpired so that his story would live on, in the future, and his name would be known. For no one knew his name and no one knew about his existence. He was invisible from everyone's eyes. And he was so accustomed to sneak around people that it seemed completely normal not to be seen. Joining the Brotherhood meant losing his own identity. And all in all, he was okay with it. But what the Brotherhood was trying to achieve was too important and it couldn't fall into oblivion. In a way, it could be considered an affront to Sithis himself. Matthew was a devout follower of Sithis, despite what Bedelia had told him the first time he entered the sanctuary. There, no room was left for deities. Bedelia's family had abandoned the Old Ways and yet they still survived. How they managed it, Matthew did not know.

He was hidden behind some bushes, almost in front of the Legion's building, in Dragon Bridge. He had expected Gaius Maro to leave the Outpost to head towards one of the big cities. Killing him right away would have been dangerous: in such a small village he would have attracted too much attention.

Gaius made his appearance after a while. He didn't come out the Outpost, though, as Matthew had thought. Instead, he walked out from the inn. A Breton woman, with a scruffy green dress and a sword in the sheath, kept her hands around his waist and gave him kisses on the cheeks. Matthew leaned forward, trying to understand what they were saying, hoping that they would blurt some useful information. But the only thing he could hear was the sound of their kisses and, in all conscience, it disgusted him enough.

Then, Gaius Maro greeted the woman who was with him and walked away. From the path he had chosen, Matthew realized that he was heading towards Solitude. Perhaps that would have been his first stop. Matthew followed him.

Morndas, morning

"How did you sleep last night?"

"I slept, that was something".

Will was feeling better. No thoughts of death and horror had haunted his sleep. The Enhanced Stamina potion had worked. But it was a precarious stability; anything could damage him and Will could only hope that it was not another murder.

"Please, don't tell me you no longer need a potion after all we did"

Will snorted. They were in Hannibal's room, at the Winking Skeever. The man was busying himself at the workbench and had a smirk on his face. Will watched him, intrigued by his gestures. He didn't say anything about the ingredients he had chosen or the procedure he intended to follow. Will didn't bother to ask: he didn't know anything about alchemy and it would have been a waste of time. Despite this, he recognized some of them. Salmon eggs and fishes were displayed on the bench, as long as flowers and fungi. But he was unaware of their properties, thus of the effects they could have. Hannibal, however, seemed optimistic.

"I did not know you were able of making jokes."

Hannibal smiled with ineffable self-content. "It appears I am."

Will walked to the table, while Hannibal grinded a Bleeding Crown mushroom and threw over them drops of lavender essence. The fire, nearby, was already going. The confident way he moved gave Will a sense of security. *Maybe this will be my lucky day* , he found himself thinking. A thought that had escaped the strict control he had always imposed on himself. And it was Hannibal's confidence that contributed to create weak spots in his fort. It was funny, considering how threatening Hannibal had seemed to him when they first met. Threatening and disturbing.

"I apologize if I didn't notice it before", Will replied. "You cannot blame me, though". Hannibal looked at him, as he set a pot on the fire. Will held his gaze for a few moments until he could no longer withstanding. There was something scary in his eyes. "There is something scary in your eyes".

Hannibal quirked his left eyebrow. "Are you scared of me?". No offensive tone in his question. Perhaps, just a small tinge of delight.

Will exhaled. Was he? He was afraid of social interactions. He was afraid of the way he acted and reacted when he was around people. But people didn't scare him. So no, Will had no fear of Hannibal. He shook his head. "But your eyes are hooded, unreadable. It's a bit scary. It's like you hide a secret behind them".

"Everyone has secrets".

It was true. Will had tried to hide his most of his life. "The secrets of some are more gruesome than others", he declared.

"How much are gruesome yours?"

Will didn't answer. He sat on Hannibal's bed and waited for the potion. Hannibal had prepared a bottle in which pouring the pot's content once it was ready. It was made of glass and it was decorated with silver curlicues. Fancy and sophisticated like him.

When the scent of the mixture had filled the room and Hannibal had poured it into the bottle, he handed it to Will.

"So, what should I expect?" Will asked.

Hannibal explained him the matter ensuring he understood everything. He said that it wasn't much different from an Enhanced Stamina potion, that he would feel physically stronger and that it was more than merely palliative: it was a proper cure. He went into great detail about how the potion would repair the cracks of his mind, not letting the evil crawl inside.

That was at least what Will got and he nodded mindlessly. He didn't care, all of a sudden, and now that he had the potion in his hands, he was not sure he wanted to try at all. He asked if he had to drink it right away. Suddenly his mind was clouded with doubts.

"Can I wait a little?"

"Of course, Will. Drink it whenever you feel ready".

Hearing Hannibal saying name brought him back to reality. He decided he needed to think more about it and prepared himself to take his leave. Then Hannibal spoke.

"Jack asked me to join him in the afternoon. He will be at the Blue Palace with General Tullius to discuss the parade. Will you be there as well?"

Will nodded and left the room, heading for the hall. The potion in his pocket was particularly heavy.

Morndas, afternoon

The gurgle of the river had followed him throughout the journey. Gaius Maro was only a few meters ahead. Matthew walked without making a sound. He hid behind a rock or a bush whenever Maro turned his head back towards him: even so, he was often close to being detected. The road was lonely and silent.

When the sun had reached its zenith, Maro stopped and sat on the grass, by the river. He took a piece of bread out of his bag and ate it in the peace and quiet of the countryside. Matthew,

still behind him, looked at him. The man was facing the sun and his neck was stretched and exposed. Matthew couldn't help but fantasize about sinking the knife blade in it.

His stomach made a noise. He was hungry but he had no time to eat. It wasn't something new to me: often contracts that Bedelia assigned to him required fasting. However, he could say that he had eaten more during his staying at the sanctuary than in his whole life. The feasts organized whenever someone accomplished a contract were incredible, at least according to him who had lived in poverty for years.

Matthew looked inside his bag as well, hoping to find, like Maro did, a piece of bread. Instead, he grabbed a roughspun tunic. He didn't even remember he owned one. He glanced at Maro who, in the meantime, had stood up and stretched out his legs. Matthew had an idea.

He took off the Brotherhood suit. He put it in his bag and ripped out a page of his diary. He wrote two lines on it. He wore the roughspun tunic and put the paper sheet in his pocket. Then he covered his bag with leaves and turned to Maro one last time. Eventually, he changed direction and headed for Solitude on his own.

"The matter doesn't concern you, Colonel". Gray hair and pompous armor. General Tullius had welcomed them in one the Blue Palace's room. A large wooden table in the middle, covered by a huge map of Skyrim, pinned by red or blue flags: a replica of the one in Castle Dour. The Jarl wasn't there, yet the General moved around as if it were his home. The only member of the royal family in the room was Lady Margot, but Jack was pretty sure that her presence wasn't due to the parade issue. She stood across the room with Alana, chatting cheerfully.

Jack had never questioned the General's orders, but the safety of Solitude citizens was a subject he took too much to heart. He couldn't afford to remain silent. He feared the General hadn't though straight about it. He was very close to the Jarl, after all, and it was evident. Even such a respectable man could lose his nerve because of love.

"With all due respect, General, I think you're not really considering how much dangerous it could be. Dangerous and pointless. The Jarl hasn't lost people's respect, no one is organizing riots and, despite the war, this can be considered one of the most peaceful period we have ever experienced".

"Peaceful, you say? They killed the Emperor's cousin".

"Yes, but people need to know they will be protected. They need to feel safe. With this parade, we are exposing them to the enemy, instead!"

The general tapped with fingers on the table. "And are you sure you are... committed to keeping people safe?"

Jack frowned. How could anyone doubt it?

"I have been informed," the General continued, "that two days ago one of your men received a visit".

"My soldiers often receive visits from family members who live far away. The Legion does not want to isolate them from the rest of the world".

"The visits received by soldiers are always subject to checks and you know it. The fact is that I wasn't talking about a soldier". The general walked around the table and reached Hannibal Lecter, who stood next to Will as he was listening to the conversation. "May I know your name?" the General asked.

"Hannibal Lecter". The look in Hannibal's face hardened. He probably wasn't used to this kind of approach, Jack thought. A man like him received only praise, most likely.

"The author of The Black Arts on Trial?"

"No, that's Hannibal Traven. I am a simple Alchemist".

"And how come the Colonel has requested your presence? We have plenty of Alchemists, here in Solitude". The general glanced at Jack. He wanted an answer from him.

"Mr. Lecter is not just an Alchemist", he said. "He had written papers on The Dark Brotherhood and I thought he could help us finding whoever was responsible for Vittoria Vici's death".

The General's gaze kept going from Jack to Lecter and he was showing a mocking smile. Hannibal then took a step toward him. "Am I to infer that I am under suspicion of something?" he inquired, candid.

Jack threw his hands up in despair. The whole thing was absurd. He sought Alana out with his eyes and then Will. Both of them were now listening carefully.

"Of course you're not, Mr Lecter!" Jack cried. "General, how can you be sure he was the one who received a visit?"

"The owner of the Winking Skeever is very chatty. A woman, he said. She arrived in Solitude on Loredas, at night. She wore a hood and he couldn't see her face, but he told me she asked for Hannibal Lecter".

At that very moment, Jack remembered. The Winking Skeever, the Ale he drank after dinner with Alana and that woman with her face hidden under a hood. It was a mistake to let her go. Solitude was a destination for many travelers and merchants, but times being what they were it was unsafe not to keep tabs on who came and went.

"So, Colonel, one of your man brought here a stranger and you weren't informed about it. How can you talk about people's safety after that?"

Hannibal's eyes narrowed. They were fixed on the General who had spoken with a mischievous and insinuating tone. When he talked, Jack was surprised to hear such a calm voice coming from his mouth.

"Colonel Crawford, I accepted to be part of your investigation because I thought I would be protected. Apparently, this protection doesn't extend to my privacy".

"Mr. Lecter... ". Jack did not know what to say. By now, Hannibal was an essential component of the team, especially considering their agreement about Will. He could not afford to lose him in any way. "Hannibal," he remarked, using his first name to be as direct as possible.

"Let me finish, Jack. I am a reserved man and I am displeased the treatment I am receiving. Yes, someone visited me on Loredas. And, to dispel any doubts, I want to point out that the woman in question is my lover". The confession surprised everyone. It was unusual to talk about their personal lives in such a context. But it was even more unusual to hear that someone like Lecter allowed himself to savor the pleasures of the flesh, as every ordinary mortal. Will side-glanced him. His eyebrows widen in surprise.

"If feasible, I would like to gloss over about the woman's identity. Suffice it to say that she left as soon as he got here and it's unlikely you will see her again. You may rest assured of that".

Things were tense. Jack wanted to apologize but he didn't even know where to start. Moreover, he thought it was better to avoid such a move when the General was still around. "We will make a parade, then", he stated in the end. He had accepted his defeat.

"We will make a parade", replied the General. "Gaius Maro should arrive here in Solitude tonight. He will sleep in Castle Dour and, tomorrow morning, we will welcome him here at the Palace and we will discuss the matter. I look forward to your attendance, Colonel".

Jack bowed his head and nodded.

When they left the Blue Palace, Jack tried to reach Hannibal Lecter to speak with him in private. He saw him walking side by side to Will, but they weren't saying a word.

"Mr. Lecter, may I have a moment alone with you?"

Hannibal gave him a calm look. He didn't seem perturbed at all by what had just happened, but Jack assumed that he was, indeed. He was just too polite to show it. Will gestured he would continue to walk alone and waved to Jack.

"I think we can get past formalities, now as you did before. Call me Hannibal". He said it gently. There was no sign of resentment in his voice.

"Hannibal, I'm really sorry about what happened before".

"It's not your fault, Jack".

"I'm sorry that you were put under pressure like that. But here in Solitude, we are all under pressure right now, for one reason or another".

"I completely understand. But I am the one who should apologize. In a way, I threatened the safety of the whole town and it should haven't happened".

Jack sighed, then nodded. He was glad Hannibal was a man of reason. If only everyone were like him, he considered, life would have been easier in the Legion.

Morndas, evening

After dinner, Will went out to get some fresh air. He hadn't seen Hannibal since that afternoon, but in all fairness, he didn't mind. All that talk about lovers and personal life made him uncomfortable. They had never discussed those matters, and it wasn't that strange: they'd only known each other a short while.

There was a chilly breeze out in the open. The streets, lit by torches, were empty. Even guards went to sleep at some point. Will still had the potion in his pocket and he had not yet decided whether he should drink it or not. He pulled it out and examined it. It was blood-red and it reminded him so much of it that he felt a clench in his gut.

He was walking around, enjoying the silence of a sleeping city. When he arrived at the well, he noticed that the square wasn't deserted as he had thought at first. A man was leaning against it. His body was relaxed and he was nodding off. Will thought he was probably dead drunk. The roughspun tunic he wore was dirty and it spoke for itself. He walked over him and saw he wasn't Noster Eagle-Eye, the beggar who used to stand outside the Winking Skeever. He watched him, trying to identify him. He had gray skin and pointy ears.

The beggar opened his sleepy eyes and looked back at Will. "Spare a coin? The Divines rewards the generous".

Will remained silent. He was a Dunmer. He had never seen a Dunmer beggar in Solitude. He recalled the conversation between Jack and General Tullius he had listened early on, about people who reached Solitude and evaded controls. He wondered if the Dunmer was one of them.

"A few septims ain't nothing. You can spare that, can't you?"

"Who are you?"

The Dunmer stared at him. Something in his face changed. His serious grin slowly turned into a slight sneer. "I am a beggar".

"I can see that. Where are you from?". Will took a step closer.

"I hid here in Solitude for a long time. I was in prison for being a pickpocket".

The beggar sat. The motion was smooth and quick. He would have been good at pickpocket. But Will looked at his red eyes and knew he was not.

"You're lying. What's the real reason you're here?". For some reason, the Dunmer made him nervous. Will almost felt a shortness of breath. Maybe it was his impudence or the way he laughed at his questions.

"I had a drunken party with the priestesses of Dibella". The Dunmer was clearly mocking him. He laughed; his eyes had turned a deeper red.

Will crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't buy that story, either".

The beggar laughed even louder then. "Too bad, that one's my favorite!".

Anger blurred Will's vision. The guy kept laughing and he just wanted to grab him, punching him... and cut his throat.

When he felt someone behind him grasping his shoulder, he realized he was holding a knife he usually carried it with him. He didn't remember the moment he decided to grab it and that unconscious gesture frightened him.

"Will?". It was Hannibal. Will's breath was shaking a bit and he turned to face him. "Will, are you okay?".

He wasn't not, but he didn't say it out loud. He glanced at the beggar again, making sure he was still there. He pointed him out to Hannibal, to try and explain why he was feeling like that. There was no need, though. The two men stared at each other, intently, as if they had already met. Hannibal's grip on Will's shoulder grew tighter.

"You know him?", Will asked then.

"I haven't been in Solitude long enough to know all the beggars", Hannibal replied, adding a gentle smile to that. "Come", he said, "There's no need to lose your temper with such people". He threw some coins at him and turned away, taking Will with him.

"Did you drink the potion?", he asked him, probably to divert his attention.

"...Not yet."

Will was shocked. His reaction was violent and, most important, uncontrolled. For the first time, he really felt scared of himself. When they reached the inn, his hands were still shaking. "I don't know what happened before, I..."

"No need to explain. Go to bed now, we'll talk tomorrow".

Will walked down the hallway and he didn't look back to him.

"Soldier Maro". In Castle Dour, he was received with great reverence. Gaius was not accustomed to it. In spite of being the Emperor's personal guard, in the Penitus Oculatus Outpost, no one gave him a special treatment. If anything, they treated him even worse than anyone, given that his father was a Commander.

He was informed that General Tullius would have waited for him the following day at the Blue Palace. Then, they accompanied him to one of the Castle Dour's and encouraged him to order for dinner anything he liked.

Maro was exhausted. His legs ached and, soon after a warm bath, his eyelids were too heavy and he couldn't care less about food. He sat on the bed and he was about to let his head hit the pillow when he heard a knock on the door.

The soldier stood up to open it, already half asleep. He didn't even asked who he was: it could only be a legionnaire. But when he opened the door, he was surprised to see a beggar standing in front of him.

"Yes?", he asked politely.

"The Dark Brotherhood sends its regards".

Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment and let me know what did you think of this chapter. *kisses*

Breaching Security III

Chapter Notes

STILL LOOKING FOR A BETA!!
If you want to beta this story, send an ask or an email.
Enjoy the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tirdas, morning

The drumming of hooves made him feel uneasy. It echoed in the silence of the dark hall and Will curled up in a corner so that the creature wouldn't see him. He was shaking and his jaw was clenched, in an attempt of making his teeth stop grinding. He pressed his knees against his chest, burying his head in them. The Stag was getting closer.

A fully grown bull elk was sniffing in front of every door. The candlelight streamed over his body, showing a black coat and a scarf full of feathers. It was looking for something. Was it looking for him? He tightened his fists.

Will opened his eyes. He was at the Winking Skeever. No dark hall around him, just the comfortable bed where he was lying and the familiarity surroundings of his room. A glimpse of sunrise was visible through the window. He took a long breath, as he got up from the bed, and wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead.

He knew he was too soon for a victory lap when, the day before, he had believed his nightmare were about to disappear. No way his mind could recover from what he had experienced in the past, and now his nightmares were even worse than before. Vivid. And realistic. And Will squeezed his eyes trying to recognize the place where he saw the animal and he realized it was Castle Dour. His gut clenched.

He wore the tunic he used to wear every day, folded on a chair next to the bed, and eyed the potion, sitting on the nightstand. Gaius Maro had probably reached Solitude during the night and if something bad had happened, he should have taken the potion right away. No time to delay the decision. He opened the bottle and emptied it into his mouth.

When he got out of his room, the first person he saw was the Inn's owner. Will narrowed his eyes, feeling defensive. He didn't like him, especially now he knew that the man was spying on them. Telling the Commander about Hannibal Lecter's visit was inappropriate, being gossipy for an Inn owner was inappropriate. Will suddenly didn't feel safe anymore.

The man got close and Will found out he wanted to talk with him.

“Mr. Graham, Colonel Crawford is looking for you”. He sounded nervous, upset. Will wanted to ask what was wrong with him. There was no need, though. He knew what to expect.

“There’s been a murder. The Colonel is waiting for you in Castle Dour. Please, hurry up”. Will almost laughed and he tightened his lips, trying not to show it. A murder and Will already saw that coming.

Since the man didn’t show any sign of letting him go and stood in front of him expectantly, Will gave him a task and sent him to call Hannibal and warn him.

“And please, try to be reserved when you do so and not to alarm the whole town. Unless you didn’t already spread rumors all over the Inn”.

It was a pity he didn’t turn to see the man’s face after saying that.

Guards shouted and run under him while Matthew was sitting on a branch. He hadn’t gone very far from Solitude and, in truth, he didn’t want to and he knew it was a dangerous move. But the moment he had laid his eyes on that man, he hadn’t got anything else on his mind.

Bedelia had told him Hannibal Lecter would be in Solitude. Bedelia had suggested to spy on him and to get information about the man with him, but Matthew couldn’t have imagined that, on an ordinary day, he would have met the Listener.

And the thought was driving him crazy, that Hannibal Lecter, whom he had seen so many times in the darkest lairs of the Sanctuary, could be the personification of a deity he glorified through his work every single day. Sithis, great Lord of void. And only now he could see him, now that the Listener was pulling Sithis’ power out. Matthew laughed, and he laughed so much he almost fell from the tree.

At the sound of hard leaves cracking near the tree where he was hiding, he snapped to attention. Since the body was found, soldiers were spread across the Haafingar Hold. The Legion was confident they could catch the culprit without difficulty, apparently, so little they knew about how sneaky a Dark Brotherhood member could be. Matthew realized that there was a good chance they didn’t know about the Dark Brotherhood at all.

Which was a shame. Did the Listener know his true identity? Matthew felt the urge of going back and telling him. And then he thought of Bedelia and her lies, and the way she purposefully decided to ignore the great Sithis and the Black Sacrament. Sick, sick, sick the way she worked, sick. She needed to learn the errors of their ways and Matthew had a revelation while having those thoughts.

He took out of his satchel a knife and he threw it against one of the guards who was standing alone not far away from him. He hit him behind his knee and the guard fall on the grass, crying in pain. No one could hear him, the rest of the army had rushed and he was probably left there to keep an eye on the area. Unfortunate. Matthew climbed down from the tree and reached the man, still whimpering, but now paralyzed. He knew how to choose his poisons, after all.

He grabbed the knife, stuck in the leg, and made it whirling in his hand. It was time to play and maybe for the last time. He was chosen and he realized it right there. He was the Keeper. Helping the Listener was his responsibility. Helping Sithis was his vow.

When Hannibal left the Inn, he was already feeling sharp. The Inn's owner had said Mr. Graham wanted to see him in Castle Dour, without mentioning any reason why, and Hannibal wasn't ready to face another annoying conversation about his private life that early in the morning. He didn't approve the way Bedelia was handling the operation and, for the first time, he questioned her ability to do her jobs. Her bad choices could jeopardize him, especially if they were made in a row. Not only she showed up without warning him, but she let a member of the Dark Brotherhood enter in Solitude, where the risk of being caught by the Legion was incredibly high, even of a sneaky Dunmer. If her involvement weren't required, Hannibal would have killed her. Surely though she had some idea going through her head, and it was something to take very seriously, but not now. He kept walking towards Castle Dour, knowing that, now more than ever, he needed to be focused and prepared for whatever he might face. He knocked on the front door.

The first person he saw was Will. He was standing against a wall, hands in his pockets and looking down. Jack was right next to him; he was talking and Will nodded from time to time.

Hannibal approached them, clearing his throat to announce his presence and both of the men turned towards him.

"Is everything alright?"

"Gaius Maro was killed", Jack declared.

Maybe it was naive of Hannibal not to have considered the possibility of a murder committed on that day, but he didn't think Bedelia could be that stupid. Nor even that Dunmer. He diverted his eyes to Will, to scan his face.

"I know who did it", Will said deadpan. There was no trace of distress, no nervousness this time. He looked perhaps even relaxed.

"Did you already see the body?"

“Jack said we should have waited for you. He was worried about my… delicate mind” and drew circles on his temple with his index finger while saying that. “But I didn’t need to, I know who did it”. Hannibal stared at him and noticed, when Will looked back at him, that his pupils were uncommonly wide. Ha had taken the potion.

“Well, I guess we can proceed then. I am here. Jack?”.

Jack sighed and opened the door. The corpse laid on the floor, right in the center of the room. It was wearing a white nightgown, half covered in blood. The cut in his throat was so deep, the killer nearly decapitated him. Will took a step forward to see better. He seemed fascinated by the whole situation and he probably was, thanks to the potion Hannibal had made for him. While Will was absorbed by the sight of the body, Jack spoke.

“Will said he saw someone new in town last night. A beggar. He said you saw him too”.

“I remember, yes”.

“He thinks he could be the murderer”.

Hannibal pursed his lips and hummed. “And what do you think?”

Jack sighed again. The man was clearly at a loss. He had never imagined a murder could happen inside the walls of Castle Dour and he was so affected by the news that, Hannibal was sure about it, he could be easily manipulated into accusing everyone. Even a simple beggar. Who was the actual culprit.

“I saw a stag tonight, in one of my dreams”. Will’s voice was a whisper. He was facing the body and it wasn’t clear if he was talking to them or just mumbling to himself. “It was majestic, beautiful. He was walking down the hall and then it stopped right there”, and he gestured to the door. “I saw it and I woke up right after, but I knew…”. Will stopped and looked at them. “Can I touch it?”.

He didn’t even wait for Jack to answer. He leaned over the corpse and then he kneeled. He reached a steady hand and he passed his fingers across the dead man’s face, closing his eyes, getting blood on his fingertips. “I must kill Gaius Maro, an agent of the Emperor's security force”, he mutters. He took a deep breath. “I must not kill him in Dragon Bridge, or on the road, but in one of the cities he visits, if… if I wish to earn a bonus”.

Jack was restless by Hannibal’s side. He kept moving, going back and forth, and he got close to Will, leaning as if he wanted to shake him out of his trance-like state to ask him to be more precise. “What is he talking about?”, he repeated, and he glanced to Hannibal, hoping he could have the answers he was looking for. But Hannibal was paying no attention to him. He was oblivious to everything but the sight before his eyes.

Will was hyperventilating. Beads of sweat adorned his forehead, as the visions got over him. Hannibal knew it was going to happen. He had waited since the moment he had seen Will’s pupils. The potion, which was making him physically strong, weakened his mind, breached into his mental fortress. His eyeballs went back into his skull and his lips parted. Hannibal was deeply affected by the way Will’s body tensed, he realized, and while Will’s body was

ravaged by his visions and the seizure he was experiencing, Hannibal found himself quite aroused. Will was now convulsing on the ground and no one in the room lifted a finger to help.

With a leap, he moved closer to the boy. He lifted his upper body, putting his hand on Will's back of the head. His body jerked, uncontrollably. His mind was disclosed, invaded by the killer's thinking. Hannibal felt that touch of him was like electricity surging through his veins. He swept a curl off his forehead with his free hand and then he stroked his hair. Sweet child, he would have said, but he uttered Will's name instead. And the boy woke up and slowly focused on Hannibal.

"Did I pass out?", Will asked, his voice hoarse. Their eyes were locked and Hannibal, for a few moments, feared he might have figured everything out. He nodded and looked away.

When Will tried to get up, Hannibal helped him. While Jack was still across the room, observing the two of them.

"I think we should let him out to get some fresh air", he just said. Will got out of the room without even looking at him or waiting for Hannibal to follow him. He slammed the door as he left.

Jack groaned. "Will is accusing of murder a beggar who couldn't ever break into the Castle", he said and the tone of his voice hinted he expected an answer from Hannibal. "A beggar who, and I am quoting him here, was laughing mockingly at him, as if he knew something"

"You're wondering if the lines are blurring or if he's onto something".

"I'm wondering all sorts of things".

"Will's mind is very fragile. We have been working on a potion, but I doubt it will be effective in the short term. Until then, he will need our support and no additional pressure should be put on him".

"So you're suggesting that I should not pursue this lead because Will can't think clearly"

"There are days when even Will doesn't understand his thinking".

Tirdas, noon

Their attention was drawn by a whining sound they heard in the bushes. That was what they would have told to their superior officers later. They thought it was a dying wolf, maybe hit by one of the soldiers' arrows. Sometimes the whining became more of a silent cry but there were no screams at all. They wanted to ignore it, but it was getting persistent and at some point, while they stood in the middle of the countryside not far from Solitude and the sun was high in the sky, one of them offered to go and take a look.

“If it’s a wolf, it will bite you and we don’t need other casualties of war”, said one.

“What if it’s the killer himself and this is just a trap?”, asked another.

“What if it’s a soldier and he’s hurt?” responded the brave one who was ready to take the risk. “I am armed and so you are. I’ll go”.

And with that, he reached the point where the noises came from. This time, everyone heard a scream. But it wasn’t from the bush or from a dying animal. It was from the soldier, whose face, as the other soldier noticed once they joined him, were white as a sheet.

There, lying under a layer leaves and grass, a man was looking at them: wide eyes, blood-covered face and no limbs.

“What the fuck”, one of them exclaimed, his voice shaking for the horrific sight. The man kept whining, no strength in him, just a plead for mercy in his eyes. A soldier noticed he didn’t have his ears, which were cut off as well, and who knew how many other parts of him he had to say goodbye to that morning.

“I’ll call the Colonel”, said the brave one, who apparently was also the only one right in their mind. And he started walking towards the City, with his stomach in knots.

Tirdas, afternoon

“Noster, you did lose an eye in the Great War, but the other one you have works very well, so you could really help me here”. Will couldn’t let it go. And if Jack didn’t want to believe him, he would have found evidence all by himself. Noster Eagle-Eye was standing in front of the clothing store, upsetting the glamorous customers who gave him looks of disdain. He had said to know nothing about a new beggar in town, but Will had insisted, he had to remember something, “You must know who your… your competitors are!”.

Noster raised his left eyebrows.

“Look, do you remember when you couldn’t find your helmet? And I retrieved it in a cave and give it to you?”

“I do, but…”

“You didn’t even use that helmet---”. Noster opened his mouth to answer, but Will continued. “and yet, I found it, I helped you, as I did every time I gave you a coin. So… You owe me one”.

“I know I do, but I really haven’t seen any new beggar in the past days”.

Will groaned and it was about to punch the wall when he heard Hannibal calling his name. He was coming out of the Inn. Will thanked the poor Noster for his patience, although he didn’t prove himself to be very useful, and reached Hannibal, who looked puzzled. He gestured towards the beggar.

“I was… asking some questions”.

“Still about the beggar?”

“It was… Yes, it was about the beggar. Hannibal, you saw him yesterday. I didn’t make it up, did I?”

“You didn’t”.

“So why aren’t you believing me? Why isn’t Jack believing me?”

“Because you must admit that thinking a humble beggar could get into Castle Dour and kill the son of an Imperial Commander is quite fanciful, to say the least”.

Hannibal started walking and Will followed him, although no one had asked him to. He noticed the man was holding a book under his arm and he wondered what he was about to go or do, at that time of the day.

“We searched for evidence that could be related to the Dark Brotherhood”, Hannibal said, let the matter of Will’s inquisition to Noster go. Hannibal was condescending towards Will, he had noticed, even in situations where everyone would have told him he was out of his mind.

“Did you find any?”

“No, not really”.

They kept walking and Will wondered if that meant Hannibal would leave the investigations. It would have been a problem, then, at least for Will who needed his presence to prove his point. Cause he knew it was about the Dark Brotherhood now. He knew by the way that stag enjoyed killing Maro that night, enjoyed the taste of blood spurted from the wound on his face. The stag. He saw it again when he touched Maro’s body and he didn’t have the time to think about how peculiar was to have such a vision. He didn’t even ask Hannibal about it. He could have been a Dark Brotherhood symbol after all, and he was about to form the question but then they reached the Blue Palace garden.

“We can’t stay here”.

“Yes, we can. And we are, as a matter of fact”

“But we aren’t allowed---”. Will looked at one of the guards standing at the entrance who didn’t move an eyelash. “Did you bribe them?”.

Hannibal laughed. “I had the permission of the Jarl Elisif herself, whom I met last night. A very nice woman. I talked her about my art as an Alchemist, she seemed very interested. She said I can come here to take the plants and flowers I need whenever I want”.

“You seem to have a way with ladies”.

Hannibal was bent down, looking at flowers, picking some of them. “Do I?” he asked, smelling one. “I have a way with Alchemy, that is certain”.

Will didn’t insist. There was a part of him who wanted to ask further, to talk about Hannibal’s lover who caused turmoils the day before, to know if he was a womanizer, a seducer, if he swept everyone off his feet. Instead, he stayed there looking at him, quietly choosing his ingredients. At some point, Hannibal asked him if he took the potion and Will informed him it had worked apparently and that he really felt good, except for the episode at the crime scene. Hannibal seemed pleased about it.

After a while, they got back. Will was walking by Hannibal’s side and he was carrying his takings since Hannibal’s hands were full. The sky was turning pink, it was almost sunset, and the streets were empty, which was unusual for the time of day, but Will knew that the news of a new murder must have scared everyone. People stayed in their home, safe from crazy beggars or bloodthirsty members of a cult, something he himself should have done.

When the pass by Castle Dour, they saw Jack. He was running, a group of soldiers behind him and his face was in distress. Will shouted his name to get his attention. He turned his head towards them and his eyes got wide.

“Will, Hannibal, come along! Hurry up!”

“What happened?”

“They found a tortured body”. He didn’t stop running while he talked. “He is probably another victim, but he is still alive. Hurry, I said”.

Will looked at his hands, then at Hannibal’s ones. “I’ll be there as soon as possible”, he said to Jack. Then he run inside the Winking Skeever and threw everything in the first empty booth he saw.

Tirdas, evening

When Jack arrived, soldiers had already started fires. The countryside was dark and cold and Jack rubbed his hands together to warm them up and to let off some steam. While he was on his way, one of his soldiers had brought him up to speed about what had happened and a lot of things had crossed his mind.

The first thing was grief for a seriously injured man who most likely couldn't have recovered from an experience like that, not only on a physical level (soldiers had described his condition with details, confirming Jack's worry) but also on a personal level, and he had seen enough men traumatized by war (Will was an example) to know how much dreadful such a mental disorder could be.

Then he got worried because rumours spread at such a fast rate in Solitude. Citizens didn't even have the time to get over the shock of a murder in Castle Dour and they were now dealing with something even worse, a tortured body, and there was no way to keep it a secret. If they were going on as they were doing at that moment, the Legion should have started worrying about retaliations and uprisings. Because they were not safe anymore and there was no denying that.

Eventually, he felt relief. For a man was scarred for life but he could still talk. For the first time till the start of the investigation, Jack had the feeling he was close to catching the murderer, draw a line under it and let it go. His steps became faster and faster, as he feared he could arrive at his destination later and see everything he had hoped for disappearing in no time.

In the end, when he got to the crime scene and soldiers escorted him to the poor man, all he was left to feel was disgust. His legs were chopped off as longs as his arms and he was left on the ground, unable to move. His uniform was soaked in blood and there were some cuts across the men's abdomen, wounds still opened and still leakings. Jack had to excuse himself, moved away and puked. When he came back he noticed someone had the courtesy of washing his face and they were now feeding him with a Health Potion, holding up his head, but Jack knew it was a losing battle. The man whined and cried and a soldier told Jack he had done nothing else since they found him.

"We tried to ask questions, but…".

Jack nodded, almost ready to give up cause he didn't expect such atrocities. He lifted his head then and he saw Will running towards him. Hannibal just right behind.

"Did he tell you?", he was yelling and Jack shook his head and tried to stop him coming closer. He couldn't let the boy see something like that. He wouldn't have lived through it.

"Stay there, Will. He didn't say a word and I don't think he will". Will was now standing in front of him and he attempted to go past him and reach the man, but Jack pushed him back. "Will, you have to listen to me---"

He was interrupted by a shout. Everyone turned towards the injured man and the people who were taking care of him got up, scared by the way he yelled and screamed and repeating two words like they were a mantra. "He knows".

Jack couldn't restrain Will anymore from running towards the man. He stood still at the sight of him, but he didn't look back or move away or throw up, like Jack did, and he wondered where he found all that strength. He sensed Hannibal's smirk.

“What does he know?”, Will asked. No who, no why he had done something so horrible. “What does he know, please, tell me”. And the man stopped crying and said: “You should listen very carefully” and with that he closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment and let me know what you think!

The Cure for Madness

Chapter Notes

Still unbeta'd. Contact me here or here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tirdas, evening

“I’m gonna find him”. Will was walking. The Solitude Stables weren’t much far from where he was and he could reach them in a short if he kept a steady pace. “I’m gonna find him. And stop him”. His voice was loud. Jack, who was just behind him, called his name, trying to block him and talk some sense to him.

“You can’t just take a horse and run after him, Will!”

Will stopped abruptly and turned towards Jack. Rage had taken over him and he took a deep breath before talking again. He stepped closer to Jack. “He is playing with us”. He gestured towards the crime scene, where the tortured man, now dead, was still lying. “He did that to mock us. What should we do? Stay here and twiddle our thumbs?”.

Jack drew his hand up to cover his mouth, he exhaled a long steady breath, and then he put his hand again on his hip. He didn’t know what to say.

“Let me try at least. I have this thing in my brain, it could help me”.

“He is a mad axe murderer”.

“And I am a former soldier of the Legion. I can still shot an arrow, you know?”.

Jack looked at the crime scene, that was still visible from the point they were. Healers were putting the body on a cot and Hannibal was one of them. They had done their best to revive the poor man when they saw him passing out. Hannibal himself had rolled up his sleeves and jumped right in, as soon as the Healers had asked for help. Will was impressed by the way he did it and he had cursed himself because he hadn't had the readiness required. Instead, he had stood there, his mind numb and his eyes fixated on Hannibal’s dirty hands.

Now Hannibal was walking towards them, a white towel in his hands, stained red. Jack watched him while he got close and then he turned to Will.

“You can’t go alone”.

Will looked at Hannibal too. “I don’t intend to”.

Tirdas, night

I could give him some flowers… pretty, pretty flowers. Matthew had watched the Listener from afar with wide eyes, hoping he could absorb, drink the sight of him. He had looked at his curls, the way they swayed when he had shaken his head in horror, at his long white fingers with which he had covered his mouth and stopped a scream. *I could give him a Dragon's tongue to lick away his sadness, a Red Mountain to pledge my allegiance, a Deathbell to tell him how beautiful his mind is.*

Matthew was ready to serve him, and Sithis through him, but he knew that to do it to his best he had decisions to make and risks to take. He had ridden towards Bedelia's sanctuary repeating to himself all the steps of his plan, like it was some sort of mantra, ready to face that horrible Hagraven who made him sin and disrespect the great Sithis.

What's the music of life? Matthew wondered if there were singing in the Void, singing or dancing and he could just picture himself with an arm wrapped around The Listener's waist. The pivots, oh the pivots they would do around the hall! But Matthew wasn't sure about it; in the end, silence was the music of life and in the Void no music would have probably been allowed. Silence would have been so deep.

The door of the Sanctuary opened soon later

"You will leave after the funeral".

They were in the Blue Palace. General Tullius had spent the evening with Commander Maro who had put aside his formality and had burst in a shameless crying when he first got the news of his son's death. They had received him in the Blue Palace that night and General Tullius had stood by his side, telling details, promising to catch the murder as soon as possible, comforting him.

"And *that* it doesn't mean I approve it. But the situation is critical and we're grasping at straws at this point".

"I promise I will do my best to find him", Will interfered.

“Well, I doubt a traumatized soldier and an alchemist could do better than an entire Legion, but you could try. I suggest you to arm yourself in Castle Dour, use light armors and ride during the night. Of course, since you’re not part of the Legion, we won’t make a fuss if one of you dies in the quest”.

“And what if we succeed?”. It was Lecter speaking now. General Tullius couldn’t help but notice his challenging tone and narrowed his eyes. He was so sure that man hid something. How many people could have accepted to be part of an investigation where they weren’t clearly needed? No signs of the Dark Brotherhood in any of the crime scene, no need for his opinions or knowledge. Still, he had stayed, getting into the Legion’s business like he was supposed to. “What if we find the killer and arrest him? Would the Legion care then?”

“Is money what you want, Mr Lecter?”.

Lecter grinned but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. He opened his mouth to say something back, but then Graham brushed him with his elbow, and it was an imperceptible movement, General Tullius could have missed it if he had blinked his eyes in that exact moment, and Graham probably didn’t even mean to do it, but Lecter shut his mouth and let the guy spoke for him.

“For now, we’d just like to have two of your horses, General. We’re going to leave tomorrow night”.

Bedelia, sitting at her desk, didn’t expect to see him. In truth, she didn’t expect to see him ever again.

“Hello, Matthew. It took a while for you to come”.

He should have been at the Sanctuary hours before. And with no news from Solitude, she feared for him. She feared for her.

“I stopped by. I had things to do”.

“Things?”

Matthew put down his satchel and got close to the fire. He reached out his hands then, getting them warm. Bedelia stared at his back, trying to figure out what was going on. Matthew used to follow his own logic and Bedelia usually knew how to handle his mind, but he was never that defiant.

“I’ve been watching Hannibal Lecter’s… assistant”.

Bedelia snapped to attention. “Well?”

“Interesting fella he is”

“Did you meet Hannibal too?”

Matthew took the time to answer and then he sighed, and turned towards her to look into her eyes.

“Tell me, Bedelia, how well do you know Hannibal Lecter?”.

She didn’t say a word. A spark of madness in Matthew’s eyes made her breath hitched in her throat. Of all the people Hannibal had met in those days, she didn’t think it could have been Matthew the first one to notice what really laid in his soul. She turned towards the shelves behind her back and grabbed a bottle of wine. But she knew there was no way to avoid the subject now. When Matthew realized she didn’t want to answer, he spoke again.

“Poor Bedelia”, he said and the woman shivered. Drinking the wine from the bottle, she thought he wouldn’t kill her. He couldn’t, actually, for he was a loyal Dunmer and he wouldn’t dare to kill the one who had helped him when he had needed. But he had an unpredictable nature, so Bedelia scanned the shelves trying to find a knife that could come in handy. Matthew moved closer to her, reached up and put his finger around a curl of Bedelia’s blond hair. “You know, in Morrowind, traitors have the decency to hang himself in shame at their betrayals”. Matthew’s hands closed around Bedelia’s throat and began to tighten. “But maybe you need help”. Bedelia instinctively grabbed his fingers to free herself from the grip. Then she hit him with her elbow in the ribs and pushed him away. She fled, the knife in her hands now.

“You really don’t know what you’re talking about”

“I know that the Dark Brotherhood is built on the Five Tenets and you broke the most important one. *Never dishonor the Bride of Sithis,* it says. *To do so is to invoke the Wrath of Sithis* ”.

Bedelia didn’t follow the logic of his thinking process. For a second, she was about to reveal that she *was* the Bride of Sithis, and the words lied on the tips of her tongue, before deciding against it. After all, Matthew hadn’t ever seemed interesting in that kind of things and it was better to play along, to see where he was getting at.

“I traveled across this world for many years, Bedelia, searching for my place, my purpose in life. And I found out just two days ago something I should have always known but that you have kept in the dark from me so far. I am the Keeper, Bedelia. My aim is to take care of the bride of Sithis and I will do it, whatever it takes, and Sithis will rejoice”. With that, he leapt over her, trying again to clasp his hands to her throat.

She run, hitting one hallway and then another, hiding into one of the rooms of the Sanctuary and then fleeing again whenever he found her. She wondered who could have put those ideas in Matthew’s mind. If Hannibal himself had talked to him, if he had revealed Bedelia’s identity, which was then the reason behind Matthew’s attack? A thought hashed over her mind.

“If you are the Keeper, why are you trying to kill me?”

“Because you didn’t tell me that Sithis had already met their Blood Flower and that they were already conjoined in Solitude”.

The knife she was holding fell on the floor with a clang. As Matthew’s grin came closer to her face, she thought of Hannibal, the man with him and what he had said about him, and it was all clear. She felt her knees weakening while images of Hannibal and his Bride were filling her head, and she screamed, so loud that one of the members who have just arrived, came from the entrance hall and shoved Matthew against the wall.

“What is going on?”, Veezara asked, but Matthew reacted right away. Bedelia’s vision was blurred and although she knew they were fighting and Veezara might have needed her help, the only thing she could do was thinking about the way Hannibal had persuaded her, manipulated her into thinking she was the one. The pain in her chest was almost unbearable and when she was about to scream again in sorrow, she heard Veezara’s voice and turned her head, finding him on the floor. His leg was bleeding. Matthew stood not far from him, the hideous grin on his face.

“You will pay for your errors, Bedelia, and Sithis will feast on your soul. I will leave now, there’s no need to waste effort on a reckless woman as you are. But you will hear my laughter again”.

Middas, morning

The citizens of Solitude moved frantically in the crowded square. Hannibal watched them under the light of a morning sun. The bright blue sky, with no clouds on the horizon, didn’t match the sadness floating around in the city. The man was sitting on a bench, a roll of paper on his knees, a charcoal in his hands. He was drawing the line of people waiting to have access to the Hall of Dead to pay Gaius Maro their last respect. He focused on their expression of sorrow, the way they frowned and lowered their head, and he was fascinated by the compassion people could feel for someone they didn’t know.

Gaius Maro was young and strong, in Solitude his father was respected and upheld, but most of the women in black clothes waiting outside the building were there to see him for the first time. They were there to have something to talk about during the evening they spent across a fire. They were there to see if it was true what they said about the depth of his throat cut, about the expression full of horror he had on his face. It was gossip and nothing more.

No mention was made of the tortured man. People loved gruesome details about the death of notorious figures, but the poor man who had suffered all those injuries that lead him to die afterwards was an ordinary man, a young soldier in his first year of duty and the Legion

wanted to avoid the spreading of panic at all cost. The soldier was probably laying in the darkest corner of the Hall of Dead with a bunch of ugly flowers to keep his body company.

He kept drawing until a shadow crept over his paper.

“My dear Will”.

Will Graham was standing in front of him. The circle under his eyes were more evident that morning, his face thinner than the usual. He looked completely worn out and it was no wonder. Only his eyes were bright as ever. “Come, sit with me”.

He made room for him on the bench and Will complied. Hannibal put his paper and charcoal aside, then turned towards the boy, giving him full attention.

“How are you feeling today?”

Will narrowed his lips in a thin line and, looking straight ahead, he didn’t answer.

“We need to catch him”.

“I must say you seem to have taken the matter personally, Will. This kind of attitude doesn’t help you nor the investigation”.

“I’m fine”.

“You don’t seem to be. I wonder if this trip is really what you need right now”.

When Will had mentioned he wanted to leave and look for the murderer for himself, he didn’t ask for Hannibal’s opinion. He didn’t even said he was including Hannibal in it. He just took it for granted. Hannibal had smiled when he had realized it, during their walk towards the Blue Palace the previous night.

Will gave a small, bitter laugh. The boy seemed very determined to find that Dunmer and Hannibal knew that it would have taken a long time to convince him not to leave, time that they didn’t have. But in the end, he didn’t care. Traveling alone with Will would have been another opportunity to creep into his mind and under his skin. But where to start their quest was a question even Hannibal couldn’t answer and he asked Will as much, to see if he had already a plan.

“Well, you tell me” was his answer and Hannibal frowned. Will broke into a genuine smile, this time, and he went on. “You’re the expert of the Dark Brotherhood, after all”.

“We aren’t sure it’s the Dark Brotherhood we’re talking about. In fact, we don’t even know who are we looking for”.

“We are. At least, I am”.

“What does it make you so sure?”

Will took a deep breath as to find the perfect way to put it into words. Hannibal scanned his face, his hard look made soft only but the swaying of his curls and his slightly turned up nose. Will closed his eyes before speaking. “That night, when I met that guy near the well. That night I saw a stag in him”.

“You mean a deer? You saw the beggar as a deer?”

“It wasn’t a deer, it was… more like a Draugr with long horns on its head. And I didn’t actually *saw* him like this. It was an image of him in my mind. For a second, that night, even if I knew there was a Dunmer in front of me, in my head I saw a stag. Is there any imagery of stags in the cult of Sithis?”

“Sithis is sometimes pictured with long horns on his head, but that doesn’t mean---”. Will had stood up from the bench altogether, his eyes wide. Under the sunshine, they looked like two gemstones. “I knew it”, he exclaimed.

“Will, please”.

“Does Sithis have a shrine? Maybe he is hiding there”

“There is only one, as far as I know. It’s in Cyrodiil. I doubt our impertinent beggar hides in Cyrodiil at the moment, it’s a long road”.

“Then where? A temple? What about a sanctuary?”.

Of course there was a sanctuary, but that Will didn’t need to know. The Dunmer they were looking for was probably hidden in Falkreath, under the protection of Bedelia. Moreover, Hannibal was aware he had to be careful when providing information. He didn’t want Will to realize that he knew more than he should, that he had knowledge that a simple scholar couldn’t have.

Will looked at him expectantly. Hannibal licked his lips. “There’s a sanctuary in the Pale hold, according to the records”. It was true. Although Hannibal had never been there, he had read about it in journals of the Dark Brotherhood’s members’ ancestors. It was good, ancient and strong, those records said, and blessed by Sithis. He had taken into account the idea of visiting it eventually, a new place where to start, stay and build a new order. He stared into Will’s eyes, the sparkle of determination in them. “Unfortunately, I don’t know the exact location---”

“We could travel around. The Pale hold isn’t that big after all”

“What if we don’t find him?”

“I feel confident on this”.

The square was almost empty now and a smell of lunch was coming from the houses all around. Will took his leave and Hannibal stayed on the bench a little more to enjoy the peace of a desert city.

“Bested by a fool. Who’s the fool now, mmh?”

“Just try to relax, Veezara, let the elixir do its work. You’ll feel better, shortly”.

The Argonian, laying on a cot, moaned just a bit when Bedelia touched his legs to see what stage the wound was. She had tried to do her best to help him, as she was used to doing with any of the other members, who now were in Veezara’s room, watching over him. They were the closest thing to a family Bedelia could think of.

“I should have seen that coming, and for that I want to apologize”.

“No need to, Bedelia”

“I knew better and still I let my guards down. I should have known that lunatic wasn’t to be trusted”.

“What did he say to you before attacking me?", Nazir asked Bedelia. She turned to him, but she lowered her gaze, almost afraid to answer. She didn’t eventually.

“Look, it doesn’t matter now, but we have to deal with the situation”.

“Do you intend to kill him? I could do that for you, once I recover”.

“I’d like very much to do it, but who knows where he is hiding now”.

“Why don’t you search his room?”, Nazir offered. “I know it goes against one of our Tenets, but he seems dangerous and there you might find find something that sheds some light on where he might have gone”.

Middas, afternoon

“Before the ancient flame, we grieve” the priestess singed.

“We grieve” the crowded responded.

“At this loss, we weep”.

“We weep”.

“For the fallen, we shout.

“We shout”.

“And for ourselves, we take our leave”

“We take our leave”.

The ceremony lasted for at least an hour. Will and Hannibal were sitting among the other soldiers of the Legion, watching in silence, pretending to care. Will’s mind was somewhere else, already in the countryside of Skyrim, putting up a tent for them to sleep and building a fire. He had already packed and everything was settled, but he had given his agreement to leave after midnight and, although he was already bumped into high gear, he tried to stay focused on what was going on. But he didn’t succeed in the end.

“You don’t seem much affected”. Hannibal had leaned towards him and had whispered in his ear. When Will looked at him there was half a smile on his face.

“In fact, I am not”, he whispered back.

Some of the soldiers gave them a disapproval look, bothered by their voice. Hannibal didn’t seem to care at all. “Doesn’t death affect you? I would have said the exact opposite, considering your reaction to corpses”.

“That is different”.

“Is it?”

“It’s not the corpses that affect me. It’s the way they turn into corpses that I find difficult to digest. But death… It will come in any case and I have accepted it”. Someone behind them coughed loudly, someone else was stirred; he went on talking. “I lost someone important once”.

“A relative?”

“In a way. I lost my dog”.

Hannibal arched his brows. Will supposed the man wasn’t familiar with that kind of love. In truth, he didn’t seem an animal person.

“His name was Winston”.

“And did his death affect you?”

“Oh, more than you can imagine”.

A soldier shushed him and, at the same time, Jack leaned forward to ask them to continue their conversation outside the Hall of Dead.

They did, eventually. And while walking down desolated roads, Will told about Winston and the time they had spent together, in his teenage year and then in Solitude, in the Legion.

“He keeps me company even now”

“In your dreams?”

“Not really. He comes to visit me in the College. Well, I should probably say I force him too”.

Hannibal seemed to ponder his words and then he said “Conjuring spells”, in a surprised tone, as if he didn’t know what Will’s life was about before their meeting. Will noticed some kind of amusement in his expression. “Are you capable of such a complicated spell?”

“I wouldn’t be a Winterhold professor if I wasn’t”. Will laughed but he knew his statement wasn’t true. Not many people were able to bring their loved ones back from the Oblivion and his ability was just one of the weirdness which made people looked at him like a freak in the past.

“I would like to see you performing one, if you don’t mind”. Genuine interest.

“I would like to see me too, but I haven’t any soul gems with me and, to be precise, I don’t have any money to buy one. Not easy to find, those things. But I’ll show you, one day. If you’ll be still interested”

“I’ll keep that in mind”.

Middas, evening

Bedelia pushed gently the door of Matthew’s room, well aware of what it would mean such a simple action, well aware of the consequences of it. But, with a selfish disregard, she opened it fully and stepped forward in the darkness of the room.

She used a candle to shed some light and started wandering around, careful not to miss any corner, any blind spot where some useful information could hide. On the table, at the center of the room, there was a mace. Nothing fancy, just an iron mace, but Bedelia was glad Matthew hadn’t the alacrity to search for it and grab it, during their fight. In a corner, there was a wine barrel. Almost empty, Bedelia checked. Matthew had been drinking more than usual in the past, she had noticed, but she couldn’t say for sure the rash he had the previous night was a result of the effect of alcohol. She would have preferred it was.

The bed was unmade, the sheets weren’t really clean. Next to it, the nightstand, some gold coins, an empty bottle of wine. First drawer: nothing. Not even clothes or socks. He had

probably planned his flight all along, Bedelia thought. A notebook was in the second drawer.

Bedelia looked at the brown leather cover. *The Jester's journal,* she read. *Volume three* . The handwriting on the page was almost unreadable, some of the pages were stained. It was a really old diary. He had probably carried with him for almost his life. She narrowed her eyes, trying to decipher the scribbles.

There was another Sanctuary once. A Dawnstar Sanctuary. And then, below: *The passphrase is mine! I have found it, in a letter ancient as the Sanctuary itself.* She kept reading, her eyes scanning furiously the pages as she tried to find an information about the exact location of the Sanctuary. Nothing. Just a sentence, at the end of the diary: *Innocence, my brother* .

She shut the journal close loudly and she got out of the room. She needed Shadowmere, now. A trip to The Pale hold was waiting.

Turdas, first hours of the morning

In the Solitude Stables, a man was working on some saddle, while Will and Hannibal stood close to him in silence. Two horses were chosen: a black one, with dense muscles, strong legs and massive shoulders for Hannibal. Will's horse was younger and brown, his head light in build and his eyes large. They had decided to stay as light as possible and their knapsacks only contained a few health potions, knives e no food at all. Hannibal had suggested they could haunt throughout the journey and Will thought it would have been nice to put into practice his archery skills that have been dormant in the past years.

The air was warm and the clearing looked foggy from the entrance of Solitude. Will scanned it and he was glad for the low visibility: at least, they could stay longer in the clearings without worrying about being spotted.

"The horses are ready", Hannibal said, his voice still rough for the abrupt awakening.

The man from the stables put a horse's rein in Hannibal's hands, and then one in Will's ones. He took his leave soon after and started to turn off the lights of the place.

"Is everything settled?", Will asked.

"I checked my knapsack, nothing is missing. What about yours?"

"Mine is fine too". Will's blood almost boiled in his veins for the expectancy; he couldn't wait any longer, and he gestured towards the horse, ready to hop on the saddle.

"Are you sure?"

“Yeah, you said no food, right? I got everything”.

Hannibal didn’t seem convinced. Will didn’t know if he was supposed to be offended by his lack of trust, but at the same time he found himself questioning his certainty.

“I think there is something you should have put inside you knapsack, but you didn’t”.

Will frowned and narrowed his eyes. At the point, Hannibal laughed. He reached for his luggage, opening it, and then he pulled out something wrapped up, a bundle. He gave it to Will.

“Wh-”. Will was puzzled, but he took it with no hesitation. There was a gem inside.

It was small, thin and the edges were raw; they weren’t cut with accuracy. But nevertheless, it was shiny and it gave off a violet light that lit up Will’s face.

“It’s a soul gem”

“Just a Petty one, I’m afraid. I would have liked to give you something finer, but I hadn’t any much time and---”

“Thank you! You shouldn’t have, these things are expensive”

“I was glad to spend my money on something useful. I really want to see you casting that conjuring spell, you know?”.

Will smiled and he was sure his cheeks had turned red while Hannibal spoke. He put his gift in his bag and then got on the horses, avoiding Hannibal’s eyes.

“Thank you”, he said again.

Hannibal followed him, jumping on the animal. They left. The sky above them was full of stars.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment, please! It makes me write faster ;)

The Cure for Madness II

Chapter Notes

Unbeta'd. If you want to help me, contact me here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loredas

The bow was fully stretched in Will's hands. With an eye closed to create a better aim, he observed the small rabbit sniffing and jumping among the bushes. Will could see its brown fur swaying in the breeze and he was so close he could probably grab it with his bare hands, but his feet were light on the grass and the animal hadn't noticed his presence. He pondered. At that distance, shooting the arrow would have meant ripping the rabbit off. It was so tiny after all. Will wondered if they could gain enough meat from it.

He lowered the arrow; his shoulder bothered him. He wasn't used to archery anymore. He rubbed it and tried to move it, drawing small circles, but he lost balance and he hit his knee on the ground, making the leaves crunch. The rabbit moved its head towards him, big black eyes looked at him with fear, and it fled without looking back. *Good job Graham* , he thought, *no dinner for you.*

When he got back to their camp (just two tents and a fire to cook and keep them warm), Hannibal was standing in front of a pot, the scent of rabbit stew filling the air. Will laughed softly to himself.

"Where did you find a rabbit?"

"We are in the open countryside, Will, it was not that difficult".

Will gazed at him. His cheekbones looked even more pointed, the fire under the pot shining a warm light on his face. It was their second day in the open field and Hannibal hadn't yet lost his composure. On the contrary, he seemed to have everything under his control, from the dinner to the tents, which he had set up by himself. Will had tried to help him more than once, but Hannibal had given him such intense and steady looks every time, that he entirely gave up at some point. He had decided, then, that haunting could be his role; he could practice archery and do something useful at the same time. He hadn't taken into account that Hannibal mastered that skill as well.

"Is there something you can't do?", Will asked, smiling, mocking him.

At that, Hannibal smiled too, pleased. Will's cheeks warmed up.

“Please, take a sit”, the Altmer said, gesturing towards a tree stump. “Dinner is ready to be served”.

Using a wooden bowl and no spoon, they ate in silence. Between sips, Will managed a mouthful “delicious”, to which Hannibal replied with a nod and nothing more. They remained there, sitting around the fire, for long. Even after dinner, they put aside the bowl and continued their silent sky gazing. Secunda and Masser perfectly visible in the bright sky of summer and so were stars and constellation. Will abandoned his tree stump to lay on the grass and take a better look. Once he was comfortable, his hands under his head and his legs spread, he started to sense Hannibal’s look upon him.

“What?”, he asked. He didn’t make any attempt to reciprocate the look.

“I was thinking about the gift I gave to you”

“What about it?”. Will wondered if his question came out harsh, while he adjusted his curls falling on his forehead and felt self-conscious.

“Have you made plans about how and when are you going to use it?”

Will thought about the soul gem. He had stored it in his knapsack and he had looked at it almost every night before going to bed. Yes, he had made plans about it. And they involved not using it for now. He said that to Hannibal, hoping not to sound ungrateful.

“Is there a particular reason?”

“I don’t feel… ready. I guess”.

“You are a Conjuring teacher. I am sure you performed those spells on a daily basis, back in Winterhold”.

Will considered the statement for a second. He was a professor, but what he taught in the College was far much easier. Evoking someone from the Oblivion was dangerous in a way. What if a student ended to evoke a merciless creature? The Archmages didn’t want any responsibility, therefore their decision not to teach them advanced spells. Will had spent his last years conjuring arms and armors.

“I didn’t say I am not capable”.

“I know you didn’t”.

“I guess I’m not in the right mindset. That’s important, you know, when it comes to Conjuring spells”.

Hannibal remained silent and Will can’t help but laugh. “Don’t feign ignorance, Hannibal. I bet you’re a Master even in that. You probably want to make sure that your Conjuring spells are better than mine!”

Hannibal laughed softly. “I assure you that is not the case. I can’t say I don’t have any knowledge in that field” (*figured,* Will thought) “but the way your mind works tells me you

are better than me. Or anyone else".

"The way my mind works"

Hannibal's eyes were on him once again. This time, Will turned towards him and they stayed like this, looking at each other, for a couple of seconds that felt like an hour. Hannibal didn't add anything else, nor he tried to argue with him and convince him he wasn't a freak after all. He just looked at him, so Will lowered his head and said: "Tomorrow".

"And tomorrow shall be". Pleased, Hannibal got up, entered his tent and wished him goodnight.

Sundas

There were marshes this time. So many, all around them. And an annoying cold that made their skin crawl.

"Welcome to Hjaalmarch" Will had grunted that morning, the water up to his naked ankles, the boots in his hands.

Hannibal didn't mind getting wet. He didn't even make the effort to lift up his robe and now it soaked up to his knees, but he kept walking, looking steady ahead. He scanned the surrounding, trying to find a fitting place to put up their tents. It wasn't easy to see through the fog, but he could swear he had spotted a dry piece of land not very far from them.

"You could fish here", he said to Will, who in the meantime was cursing under his breath. "At least, you will have a better luck to catch something this time".

Will glared at him. Hannibal chuckled.

"I hate this place", said the boy. He hadn't ever figured him for a complainer and, in truth, it was the first time he had indulged in such comments. Hannibal wondered if there was a reason behind his statement, but Will, as if he was reading his mind, told him it was because of the vampires.

"Vampires?"

"Yeah. They say these swamps here are infested with them".

"Who says it?"

"People".

"And you believe it?". Hannibal asked it, but it wasn't really a question.

“I am not saying it’s true, but I would like not to investigate further”.

“Do you have a problem with vampires?”

“Why, you don’t?”. Will wore a baffled look on his face and Hannibal thought of his Abigail, who was still in the Lecter Manor. He hadn’t spoken to her for weeks now.

“In the interest of honest, I should say that no, I don’t”.

Will stopped his walking. “You serious?”

Hannibal stopped too. He looked at him, nodding solemnly.

“You… you know they can kill you, right?”

Hannibal sucked his lips in. He resumed his walk and a couple of seconds after, Will did the same and started following him. Hannibal could sense he had a lot of questions to ask. He decided to be the one to ask something to him.

“Do you know I don’t live alone? In my manor in the Eastmarch hold”. Will didn’t know of course. They had never talked about his past.

“Do you live with your… lover?”.

Hannibal turned towards him for an instant and then looked straight ahead once again.

“No. I live with my daughter”. He heard Will catching his breath and, for some reason, he pleased him endlessly. “She is not my birth child, mind you. I adopted her when she was ten at most”. Or, at least, that was the official story.

“What’s her name?”

They had reached a piece of land that appeared to be dry. Hannibal put his knapsack down, stepped on the grass and noticed it wasn’t all mud after all.

“Abigail”. He sat right there, letting his legs rest after their long journey. “I’m very fond of her, as you can imagine. I raised her as a Lecter, I taught her almost everything I know. She is a good Alchemist too, you know?”. Will was now by his side, his legs crossed as much as his wet robe allowed. He kept nodding, interested. “She learns very quickly, she is as smart as a girl of her age could be. And, in addition to that, she is a vampire”.

Will gaped. His mouth stayed open, forming a small circle, for a while. He didn’t even pretend not to be surprised.

“I’d like you to meet her someday”, Hannibal added. Then in one move he got up and picked some twigs he had seen moments before. “We’ll stay here tonight. You should go looking for a mudcrab. Their legs can be appetizing if cooked properly”.

They ate when the night swallowed the swamps. No stars, this time, the fog was all around them, getting into their bones forcefully. Will had put his robe to dry near the fire and he was

now half naked, sitting in his tent and shivering. Hannibal had offered his blanket, but Will politely refused, so he reinforced the fire with a more powerful spell. The place was lit like it was the middle of the day.

“I would need to draw a circle on the ground”. Will’s voice broke the silence. Hannibal was waiting to hear it. He had counted the minutes.

“You can use salt. We have plenty of it”. He gestured towards a small satchel near the pot.

Will got up. He was wearing a pair of ragged trousers kept tight around his waist by a leather strap. He took the salt and spread it on the ground. Hannibal could sense his tension, he could smell his fear of doing something wrong and the scent was so intense it covered the stench of the marshes. Will drew the circle and then stepped inside. Hannibal knew this part of the ritual; he had done so many time. He watched the boy as he swallowed and worked his jaw, while he took out of his pocket the petty gem and positioned it at the center of the circle.

“I guess I can start”.

Hannibal readjusted himself on the grass he was sitting on. He turned completely towards him, ready to enjoy the show. He nodded, as if to give him permission to start. Will took it.

He started with a blue light. Hannibal watched as it traveled through his veins, sprinkling from his head and going down, along his throat, and chest, and stomach, and limbs. Those thin lines of blue light run across his half naked body, made him look more ethereal than usual. Even his curls were shining now, and there was blue on his fingertips.

Hannibal focused on his face, the way his eyes rolled up in his head as it had happened back in Solitude days before, and he was lured by the look of ecstasy the boy emanated. Will's chest raised, as he took deep breaths, the muscles tensed and evident under the blue lighted skin. He seemed so tiny and yet so majestic, and Hannibal felt almost tempted to reach for him, hold him and absorb all his power.

His breathing became panting, and then a breach in the reality opened. Black and void threatened to eat Will alive and Hannibal stood up, as if he was fearing he could actually lose him, as if he was worried they could rip off his heart from his chest. Will panted and a moan came out of his mouth. He was saying something, Hannibal realized, but the whole sight was so carnal that he couldn’t concentrate on Will’s words. He could only feel his blood moving toward his lower abdomen, reaching between his legs. He heard a small voice in the back of his head and he was calling for Sithis.

Then, from the void, a bark. And another one, and another one. A dog leaped out and the breach closed altogether. There were only marshes, once again. The dog, made of blue ether, was on Will now, licking away beads of sweat on his forehead.

“Good boy”, Will uttered, his lips slightly turned upwards. His eyes were still half closed and he was still trembling for the effort. Hannibal moved closer to him, taking his blanket with him. He dropped it on his shoulder.

“You did a great job”, he said softly. The dog kept jumping around, cheerful, sniffing Will’s feet and then Hannibal’s boots. He wondered if it could still sense earthly smells from the Oblivion.

Will smiled, then he stroked the dog’s ears. The animal jumped on him again, licking his face once more. “Down”, he whispered to it. Then he added: “I’ve missed him” and Hannibal almost felt jealous of the strong connection the dog had with his Will, who was supposed to be Sithis’ and no one else’s.

The boy felt better soon. He got up and reached his tent, still looking at the animal and smiling at it. He entered and lie down on his sleep roll. Then, he looked towards Hannibal, who was still focused on them. “His name is Winston, by the way. I hope you two will get along just fine”.

Morndas

“The Blizzard Rest”, Hannibal stated solemnly, once they reached a cave in the mountain.

The grass was cold, spots of snow covered it. They had left the humidity of Hjaalmarch hours before, and The Pale hold welcomed them with an iced wind that had slowed their path. They had walked for long, their legs were aching for the effort, and that cave made them catch their breath in peace.

“We could stay here”, Will offered. “We could have a good protection here, out of the wind”.

Hannibal put down his knapsack. Will looked at him, while he pulled out a cloak from it and let it rest on his shoulder. He closed his eyes then, and turned his head towards the sun who hadn’t set yet. His hair looked longer now or, at least, they gave Will that impression. He thought it was due to the lack of tidiness imposed but their journey and their accommodation. That day, Hannibal had tied it in a bun, using a leather strip. Will, for the first time probably, had seen his elvish pointed ears and it startled him, as if he had forgotten his friend was an Altmer, as if his yellowish skin wasn’t a sufficient reminder.

Will waited quietly to hear an answer and, in the meantime, kept looking at him, focusing on all the details he hadn’t taken into consideration. Hannibal’s broad shoulders, for instance: Altmers were usually tall but thinner than humans, but this one was completely different. And his hands were big and they looked almost rough, although their physical appearance worked against the elegance with which he moved them. He raised one, at some point, to remove a stray strand of hair out of his eyes. He opened them and Will averted his eyes just in time, before Hannibal could notice his staring.

“We could”, he said eventually. “I am getting tired of this cold wind”. He pointed his finger to a spot in the grass. “We could build a fire there”. He got close to the spot, observing the ground. “It seemed someone has done the same in the past few days”.

Will moved towards him, now concerned. Was it the murderer? His heart started beating faster. Maybe they were on the right track. But he didn’t have the time to express his thoughts; a noise interrupted them. And it was so loud, almost deafening, like the sound of the horn during the days of the war. Winston started barking, moving into an attack position.

Will looked around, frightened. He felt the earth tremble beneath his feet and he searched for Hannibal’s eyes, seeking in them some sort of reassurance. Hannibal wasn’t reciprocating his gaze. He was staring at something next to him, something Will couldn’t see because it was hidden by the rocks. Will opened his mouth, but no words came out of it, as he saw a couple of massive creatures walking towards them.

Two large beasts, with shaggy coats of fur and long curved tusks. Every step they took made the earth quake, and they moved their enormous tails with such force that they could have probably killed a man just by hitting him with it. Behind them, a giant, holding a club made of stones and wood.

Will was still gaping when he felt Hannibal’s hand on his chest, pulling him.

“We can’t stay here”

“They’re... mammoths!” was all Will could say. He sensed Hannibal’s look of disbelief.

The Altmer grabbed at his robe, then, and forced him to hide behind a rock. The giant settled on the ground when they had stood moments before. The mammoths walked slowly around him, waving their ears. Will was almost mesmerized.

“It’s the first time I see something so big! I thought they were a legend”.

Hannibal chuckled.

Tirdas

“Look at what I found”.

The exploration of the south side of The Pale hold, which lead them to nothing, they had decided to continue on to the capital, Dawnstar. Will had kept asking questions about where and when they would have reached the ancient Sanctuary and Hannibal had been honest when he had told him he hadn’t any idea. Although his first intent was to keep Will - and the Legion - far away from the Dark Brotherhood, he was now as curious as his companion about

the place, and he as well was looking forward to finding it. They had traveled across farms, ancient tombs, giants' camps (Will was more and more fascinated by the mammoths. His eyes widened every time he saw one of them, in such a childish way that made Hannibal warm inside), they had reached the board of the hold, Dragonsreach visible on the horizon. They had passed by an inn and Will had tempted him to rent a room (*"How I wish for a soft bed!"* he had said, petting the dog's ears while it whined happily) but eventually they had continued north and only after the sun had set they stopped to rest.

They had put their tent not far away from an ancient Nordic tomb. Hannibal could sense Will's skin crawling every time the wind whistled through the trees, singing creepy songs. He had watched him as he looked around suspiciously, tending his ears in the same way as the dog did. In the distance, he had spotted a dragon flying over the top of the mountains, and he gulped, trying to focus on the fire he was building.

It was then that he noticed something on the ground and run towards it to pick it. Hannibal had squinted his eyes to see more clearly what now laid in his hands. It was a shiny thing, a ring perhaps, but not small enough. A necklace, maybe? Hannibal had moved closer, as Will extended his hand to show him his finding.

"It's a circlet".

It was made of silver, Hannibal noticed, and if it wasn't for the sapphires set in it, it wouldn't have been of much value. The finish was uneven and here and there it had flaws one couldn't gloss over, but it was gleaming and polished and Hannibal could picture a bunch of naive thieves stealing it from the nightstand of a commoner and dragging it until they had reached the place where it dramatically took its leave from the rest of the loot to stand on the ground all by itself.

"It isn't of some value", Will told him and Hannibal agreed. As Will lowered himself to put it where he had found it, Hannibal moved and remove it from Will's hands. He observed the item once again: no enchantment was placed on it, no poison it hid. It was just a tiny sparkling thing and, without thinking about it, Hannibal put it on Will's curly head.

The boy's cheek reddened all of the same, while his eyes widened in a puzzled look. His dark brown curls caressed his face, such a strong contrast with the paleness of his skin. The boy was beautiful. For the first time, Hannibal admitted to himself what he had thought for very long. So delicate were his features, so thin his limbs, that he looked like a woman sometimes and, with the silver circled on his forehead, it could have been compared to the most beautiful princess of the Empire.

"It is of value on you", Hannibal said and he searched for Will's eyes, but the boy was resolved to avert his gaze as much as possible. Hannibal smiled at him when he finally yielded to him, ducked his head and observed him through long eyelashes. Then he turned around, towards the fire and the pot where he was supposed to cook their dinner, and he left Will there, silent.

Middas

Snow had fallen, and now their feet were sinking in it. They were not far away from the Capital, of this Hannibal was sure, although the existence of the Sanctuary seemed more and more a mirage. The Altmer turned towards his companion. He was trembling, the cold too intense for him to stand it, and his eyes were exhausted. He felt sorry for him and, at the same time, he was affected by his determination to keep going, never looking back. Will raised his head just a little; his hands were busy, the fire almost ready to be set. A brief smile on his lips, when he met Hannibal's eyes, then he glanced away.

Hannibal retraced their path, from their last camp to the one they were preparing. He remembered a fort, not far from there. He searched for it, scanning the surrounding, detecting the top of the guard towers over the hills. It was probably empty; the lights were out, no signs of dwellers, no horses in front of the building, as he recalled. He drew Will's attention. His cheeks were flushed now, his lips red like snowberries. So tiny and fragile he looked, like a blizzard could have swiped him away.

"The fort right there", Hannibal gestured towards it and Will followed his silent order and looked at it as well. "It seems more suitable".

Will stared at him with his big eyes of diamonds.

"It's probably full of bandits".

"There were no horses nor carriage outside, and I didn't hear any voices. We could try".

Will considered, but his hands were trembling so bad, that he didn't take long for him to agree with Hannibal. They put their knapsacks again on their shoulders and started walking, the dog wagging his tail just behind them.

The lookout post was empty, as well as the two guard towers in the rear of the fort. The only sound he could hear was the one made by their feet walking over the snowy path. They reached the main door and stood in front of it, Hannibal deciding what to do. But before he could say anything, Will reached his hand and knocked. Hannibal didn't have enough time to grab his wrist and stop him. He just glanced at him and then waited for an answer that never arrived.

Will pushed the door open and sneaked inside. The wind whistled and every creaking made their hearts pound in their ears. The boy grabbed his bow and an iron arrow, while the dog sniffed around until it got to the building standing at the center of the Fort. It was a house or an inn at the very best, and the lights were turned out even there. Will gestured at it with a movement of his head, suggesting Hannibal to follow him. He got close. Looking through the dirty windows inside the building, checking if it was empty as it seems to be, he whispered "All clear" and entered, Hannibal with him.

The smell of death was what welcomed them. The two of them examined the place- a tavern, as Hannibal had presumed, but probably unused for months-, went downstairs, following the stench in the air. Will covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve. Inside the bedroom, lying on the bed, the body of a Redguard, covered in blood. Hannibal heard Will catching his breath. He went past him, got close to the bed, to check the corpse. Stabbed to death while he was sleeping. The cut was unrefined, not grace in the hands of the one who stroke the attack.

“It’s the work of bandits”, he announced, more to reassure Will who stood still.

“I know” was all he said, and Hannibal narrowed his eyes, cause Will hadn’t even looked at the body closely and he had already sensed it wasn’t made by the Dark Brotherhood’s hands. Was the connection so strong?

“We should burn the body so we can sleep here”, Will said, his jaw clenched now, his expression serious and almost angry. “There’s a fire pit upstairs”.

Hannibal dragged the dead body with him, obeying to Will as if he were Sithis and not the other way round, captivated by his tone of command, lured like a fish.

The corpse was rotten and its stink sickening. Hannibal left him at Will’s feet. His hands now, even his robe was now disgusting but, truth to be told, it wasn’t the first time he found himself in a situation like this. He waited.

“They always have to fight back…”. A shadow crept over them from the windows. A figure was standing outside the inn. Probably two, maybe three. Will put his index finger on his lips. “...told him to just hand over the gold...”. The scent of Will’s fear was intoxicating. It burned through Hannibal’s nostrils, he needed oxygen but he didn’t want any. Just his Will and his mind working furiously to find a solution. *What will you do, dear boy?* he thought, and he knew he could have killed them right away if he wanted to. “...but did he listen?”

The door opened up. Two Nords stood in bewilderment as they realized they were in front of strangers. “What…?”, the woman started but the man, pale skin and thick blond hair, launched against Will without thinking about it.

A fist, on his jawline, was the first hit. Hannibal knew it would have been swollen by the next day. Then another, on the cheekbone, and Will fell against a wall, blood already dripping. The woman, with his ragged clothes which smelled like sheep, tried to attack Hannibal. Her arms raised, an ugly grin on her face. Hannibal caught her by her neck, turned her around and blocked her body. He didn’t have time for her, Will was keeping on fighting. She was dead before she knew it. He could have helped him, in truth, but the sight he was offering was lovely.

Will avoided another hit, and punched the bandit in the ribs, leaving him coughing. The boy was panting now, his forehead sweating. So much he was focused on the fighting that he didn’t even noticed Hannibal standing still, mesmerized.

“You picked a bad time to get lost, friend”, the filthy Nord said, and reached into his satchel. “Gonna rip you... open!”.

The knife's blade shone under the moonlight that entered through the windows. Hannibal saw the man as he raised his armed hand, ready to sink the knife into Will's chest. The boy was fast, though. With quick movements, Will disarmed him.

The knife was in his hands in no time. He drew the blade to the bandit's throat and grinned. "You sure?", he asked, mocking him. The bandit tried to escape and Will pressed the knife until it dug into the man's skin.

There were many things Will could do. Frightening the man was one of them. Threatening him and his kinship. Making him pee his pants with just a glance. He could also hurt him, leaving him on the floor, bleeding. Stealing from his satchel, taking away food and arms. Instead, he looked at Hannibal. And Hannibal, in Will's eyes, saw an unusual gleam.

Will plunged the blade deeply, blood spraying on his face, and as the man died and his gaze got unfocused, the same happened to Will, until he fell on his trembling legs.

Hannibal passed over the convulsing dying body and approached the boy, kneeled in front of him, grabbed his face. It was stained red. He felt Will's breath on him and Sithis' power in him.

"Stay with me", he whispered.

Quickly, Will came to his senses. He hinted a smile, still shaking a little.

"Where else would I go?".

That night they didn't sleep in the Inn. It stank too much of death and Will asserted it made him feel even more nauseous. Hannibal wanted to ask how did it feel, what did he think while taking the man's life away, but he avoided to ask questions: there was time for that. He built the camp, in the courtyard of the Fort. No fire to warm them up, but just one tent, for the two of them. They laid in their sleep roll, but didn't look at each other, not even once. Will stopped trembling altogether shortly after.

T urdas

The sun was high in the sky, when they reached the capital, and yet it was cold, in a way that for Will was almost unbearable, despite he had lived in Winterhold for years. Here the icy wind blew hard from the nordic sea and made their steps intolerable. Will had stopped once or twice, in the middle of a blizzard, but he found out it was even worst.

Dawnstar was far from the glitz of Solitude; it was more a town than a capital city, and its alleys were quiet and empty. A few houses stood on the shore and the tavern was upon them, on a hill from which one could have seen the whole village. No signs of ancient sanctuaries around; no signs of antiques at all. Only the distant cry of a dragon that Will couldn't see.

They still made his skin crawl and Will wondered if he would get over his fear of them sooner or later.

They ate in silence (leftovers of bushmeat from their previous meal) sitting under a snowy tree and looked around, trying to figure out what to do next. Will thought of their journey and suddenly a strange fear of having made the wrong path stroke him and his appetite was lost. The Sanctuary could be anywhere in the Hold and, although it hurt him to admit it, even to himself, he was terribly exhausted.

“If it isn’t here either, I give up”, he stated, while Hannibal kept eating, quiet and careless. Their wake up was embarrassing. Will had curled up against his friend, while sleeping, and his forehead touched Hannibal’s forearm when he first opened his eyes. He wondered if he had accidentally touched him, during the night, if his restless sleep had bothered Hannibal’s, if he had made sounds to waking him up in the middle of the night. He wondered and his doubts were consuming him. But he didn’t ask and they kept going through their day, bigger and important things in their mind.

In the afternoon, they explored the outer edge of the City. Sailors working on their ships was all they could see, but they walked and walked, on the white shore, and it was then when Will heard a strange voice.

“Can you hear it?”

Hannibal’s look was puzzled when he turned to face him. He stared at him for a second, then shook his head. Will hummed and continued his walking. But the voice talked again.

It was an invitation, a call. Will couldn’t make out the words, in truth, but he knew their meaning, he was certain of it. He redirected his steps all of a sudden. Hannibal, now behind him, didn’t even ask where he was going. Will was sure he was probably thinking he had gone crazy. He wouldn’t have been the first one to believe it.

The voice was still talking. It was confusing, its sound, and all Will knew was this: there were times in which he felt like a freak, because of his fragile mind, because of his strange abilities that he couldn’t control, and in those times he feared for his mental health, and he cried, because he didn’t want to lose his mind and yet his mind was filling with horrid images he couldn’t comprehend nor accept. In those times a sense of guilt crushed him and air left his lungs and peace seemed just a mirage. But now, standing in front of an ancient black door he didn’t even knew he was walking towards everything was clear and he had just to open his mouth and saying it.

“What is life’s greatest illusion?”, the voice asked.

Loathing himself for all his life was pointless, feeling guilty was pointless, and if he only had known it in time, he would have embraced his nature beforehand. Because, in truth, every person born under Tamriel’s stars was guilty in a way. And he got it only now that the black door was looking at him.

“Innocence”.

The stone moved and he was inside.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed it!
Leave a feed and let me know in a comment!

The Cure for Madness III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Still Turdas

A muffled thud was all Matthew required. The sounds of steps and the quiet whispers that followed it were unnecessary. He knew. And, in fairness, he had known all along. Nothing could have kept them apart, not even Bedelia, with all her annoying smartness she showed every time she had the chance. She could have given the order to kill him to someone, that was true, and she had probably tried to do so, sending some poor Brother loose in Skyrim to search for him. But even that wouldn't have been enough. Because they were meant to meet, in that very place, and Matthew was shivering in expectancy, while pacing the place. The Listener was there for him.

He could hear the void in his mind, a weird absence of sound that was louder than sound itself. He could hear the beat of his heart, the blood pumping in his ear. Sithis was there too; it was deafening. Following his Spouse, he had walked through the door of his Sanctuary as he had done so many times back in Falkreath. Only now, Matthew was to take care of everything, and he had settled every single detail to please Him and delight Him. Deathbells and red roses adorned the hallways, while the table in the dining hall was finished with cups of red liquid, blood He could have drunk if He wanted to, and hearts on silver plates. He had always been a slicker for details.

He paced the place, once again, and he wondered how much he would have waited to see them. The Sanctuary was huge, nothing like the misery of Bedelia’s. Majestic, although dirty and chaotic. There were rooms for every member, if ever they decided to move; not to mention all the tools to practice one's skill and so on. It was also well guarded. Ghosts of former Dark Brotherhood members, armed with daggers as the old customs of the Order suggested, kept the whole Sanctuary under control. It was their mission: they were destined in afterlife to guard the halls of the Sanctuary, and they fulfilled their obligations.

It was not easy for Matthew to get through their scrutiny and enter the place. A bunch of them had tried to attack him and if he didn't die under their hit, it wasn't because they weren't capable of. But they had kneeled at him at some point or, at least, one of them did, and the others followed the movements, and the main entrance was soon filled with wild whispers as they greeted the one true Keeper.

He kept pacing. The void was louder now. A laughter escaped Matthew's lips. They were so close.

"What the hell are those things?"

Will avoided the strike of a dagger, leaning back, and he almost lost his balance and fell upon Hannibal, who was standing behind his back.

"Ghosts" was Hannibal's answer, his voice flat and calm. Will felt a twinge of envy towards the man and his imperturbable composure that never left him.

"I know that," Will replied frantic as he tried to hit one of the figures with his knife. "But why are they attacking us?"

Together they run, hiding in the nearest room they found. Will waited for Winston, that was still barking and biting at ethereal flesh, and then he shut, loudly, the door.

With his back against it, he turned towards Hannibal and they exchanged an accomplice look.

"Please, tell me they can't cross walls and other solid objects" he blurted out and then he laughed and Hannibal with him. Will's cheeks felt warmed by that sound and the idea of them joking together in such a dangerous situation.

"Their spectral appearance is just an appearance, Will."

The man reached out his hand to scratch Winston's ear and the dog whined, happily. "You, more than anyone else, should know it."

The dog raised his paws and put them on Hannibal's knees, searching for more cuddles. Will observed them and he found himself captured by the image of his two travel companions being comfortable around each other. He smiled and ducked his head.

Hannibal used a spell to light the room. It smelled like mold in it, and the stone ground was wet, so much that Will felt water at the bottom of his boots. Following Hannibal around, he kept making noises with every sticky step.

He gritted his teeth.

"What kind of room is this?" he asked to Altmer.

In the middle of the space, a table. Will put his hand on it, to orient himself better in the unknown environment, still dark despite the light-creation spell. The table was made of wood and, on the surface, a thick layer of dust. The Sanctuary was probably unused for long, no doubt in that. Still Will did not expect to find such a practical item in a place build for holy purposes. Folded meticulously on the table, pieces of clothes. They were old, wrenched, and different from anything Will had seen before. Not elegant like the dresses of nobles, not safe like the armor of soldiers. Will took one of it in his hands, to examine it. The fabric seemed precious, to Will's knowledge, and it was thick; an iron arrow could not have penetrated it. Will kept looking at the clothes, until Hannibal interrupted his thoughts and spoke.

"These are very ancient," he said as he touched the fabric.

There was something peculiar in his eyes, Will noticed. Like a spark of wonderment, a fascination. For a man like him, who had spent his life studying the cult, being in the Sanctuary was probably quite the experience. He had probably waited all his life for this.

"Is this a dressing room?", Will asked him, charmed by the man's awe. His lips were apart, and the boy looked at him, with widening eyes.

"In all likelihood, it was." He wandered around the room, searching for something. He opened some old books he found on the shelves and closed them again while clouds of dust appeared in front of his eyes. And Will watched him. Hannibal looked like it was on his territory for once in his life, and Will knew deep in his heart it was true.

"Tell me more," he said, almost in a whisper.

"The Dawnstar Sanctuary is not just a temple to praise Sithis. It was supposed to be the home of the Dark Brotherhood, hence the dressing room. They lived here, the members of the Brotherhood. I'm sure that, if we had the time to look around, we could find a dining room too, as well as a place where they used to sleep."

Will considered how life could have been if lived in a place like this. It was dark, no windows to see the sky and feel the breeze, and the atmosphere was oppressive. He felt out of breath more than once, and he wasn't sure if it was because of the adrenaline of the fight against the ghosts or for the scary vibes the place gave him. Will also considered how the life of a Dark Brotherhood member could have been: so devoted to a cause, to an entity, that they sacrificed themselves and quit their normal life. Will knew that kind of feeling, he had experienced it during his years in the Legion. But he had lost that ability, and since then, he had carried his life on with apathy.

Hannibal looked at him, and his gaze was intense under the light of the torch. Will realized that, since he had met him, he had feeling it again, the desire to be devoted to something. He smiled at him and felt unexpressed gratitude towards the Altmer.

Then someone, far away from them, far away from the quietness of the room, laughed. And it was affronting, gross in a way. Will eyed Hannibal, to see if he had heard it too. But the man hadn't moved from his spot, still reading ancient documents and yellow pages.

"I *knew you would have come!* " a voice hissed. " *I knew you would have found me!* ".

Will tugged at Hannibal's sleeve, without thinking about the rudeness of the gesture. Hannibal had just the time to narrow his eyes before Will opened the door wide to run away.

It didn't take long for them to find him. Two dark hallways they walked through, as well as a large dining room and an antique archive that Hannibal wanted to visit again as soon as possible. Eventually, they reached the torture chamber. Nothing fancy, in truth; the devices he spotted inside was nothing compared to the one he owned in his own Manor. Yet, the walls were impregnated with the smell of horror, the result of years of work, and Hannibal breath it in, sensing the power of Sithis waking up inside him.

From the spot they were hiding, they could see the room in its whole and the beggar as well, sitting in one of the cages hung to the ceiling, his legs swinging in the air. He was talking to himself, laughing sometimes, or sighing loudly for reason Hannibal couldn't know.

Will turned towards the Altmer. In the dark, he couldn't see his face, but he felt the boy's breath brushing his cheeks more than once.

"You stay here, okay?" was all he said, and he didn't even give Hannibal the time to answer that he was already gone, ready to face the man who had brought him there. Hannibal stayed where Will left him, hidden, Winston curled up on his feet.

He leaned towards the door, so he could see them better, the beggar in the cage and Will from the rear. The Dunmer widened his eyes when he realized he wasn't alone anymore.

"He's here! You're here! We're here!". He leaped from the cage and landed in front of Will. He jumped around the room, a fool happiness pervading him. Will stood still, probably trying to take steady breaths and not let him know he was nervous and shaken.

"All this time we have chased each other, haven't we?" he continued. "And now we're here, and we're coming to the end of our play. The grand finale!". He spread his arms in saying that, and he smiled with expectancy. But, in the end, Will didn't reciprocate his joy. Hannibal couldn't see his face, but he didn't need to. He knew exactly how Will was reacting to the beggar's outburst.

"Our play? Do you think that killing people like you did was a play?"

The beggar tugged at his worn-out clothes and looked at his feet, feigning a shyness that didn't belong to him.

"You caught me," he sighed. "You caught me and, for this, I surrender." He extended his hands then, crossing his wrists as if Will wanted to tie them and drag him to the Legion right then and there. In truth, it was probably what Will had in mind. But, for some reason, he stayed there, quiet and unresponsive to the Dunmer in front of him, who had started laughing again.

"Tell me," he said when even his last spasm of laughter disappeared. "I know you didn't come here all by yourself. Tell me... Where is He?"

Hannibal held his breath for a second, and his sensed Will's confusion as it took over him.

"What are you talking about?"

The Dunmer took a step closer, and he observed his face carefully, his eyes squinted. "I get why He chose you, though," he whispered.

"He...?"

"You really are beautiful."

Hannibal clenched his fist, and it was a reaction he couldn't avoid. So possessive he was that he felt anger coiling in his belly at the sight of a the Dunmer standing close to his Will, his Spouse. Sithis could not accept such an outrage and he wondered if the beggar was aware of it, if his devotion made him that blind.

"This is madness. You're mad," said Will in a whisper, still confused, still shocked. He didn't turn towards Hannibal, although the Altmer knew he wanted to.

"I am mad," the Dunmer started. His gaze was hard against Will's delicate face. He didn't flinch, though, the boy, nor he stepped back. "As much as you are. People don't understand much about me, but I bet the same happens to you. Am I right? We aren't very different from each other." He extended a hand and made it land on Will's cheek. Dirty long fingers traced the curve of his cheekbones and his jawline. "There is a reason why we were both chosen."

"Chosen by who?" Will asked and in that very moment Hannibal stepped out of the dark to stand in front of the chamber's entrance.

The Dunmer's eyes went wide when he noticed Hannibal's presence. He started shaking, from the head to toe, and his expression changed. There was no trace of the smug smile now, only a shadow of fear, concern that made his forehead wrinkle.

Will stood still and didn't turn around to check if it was Hannibal who was standing behind his back and not some strange creature. He didn't turn around to seek reassurance in his eyes, although he would have found it, a lot of it and just for him.

With a whine, the beggar fell on his knees. His hands covered his face in shame while Hannibal spoke to him with inaudible words, and each insult brought another whine out of the beggar.

"I am sorry!" he cried, rocking his body back and forth, "I didn't know there was a plan!"

Death, that was what he deserved, that mediocre Dunmer interfering with the plans of Sithis, with no permission, with no authority. He was pleading mercy and Hannibal felt even more disgusted.

"Oh, are you sorry now?". Will's voice sounded like his own, at least in his head. As the black power took over his mind, he seemed like even Will's limbs were his own.

"Were you sorry when you crushed Vittoria Vici's skull with your arrow?"

He could have even used Will's limbs as his own, crushing the Dunmer's skull too, as he had done with that Vici girl. Hitting him and destroying his rotten body.

"Were you sorry when you tortured that soldier in the woods?"

The beggar's whines sounded like the music of a violin in the background. They accompanied his bursting rage, his uncontrolled anger.

"Were you, ah? Were you?"

The first strike was so hard, Hannibal almost felt it in his hands. Will punched the beggar right in the face, made him fall, hit the ground with a loud noise.

"This was for Miss Vici," Will whispered. But he didn't stop as he kicked him in the ribs ("This was for Gaius Maro"), then in the face again. Every strike was a shot of power in Hannibal's veins; it run through his body and hit his brain, leaving him panting, aroused. He could feel the stag horns cracking the skin on his head, growing strong and tall, reaching the ceiling.

Will was sitting on the beggar now, blocking his body with his thighs. As if he was riding him, Hannibal thought, and another twinge of jealousy hit him.

"You're mad," Will said to the beggar, his hands clasping his neck. "And there is only one cure for your madness." He extracted his knife from the pocket of his robe and sank the blade into the Dunmer skin, once, twice, three times and then again, until Hannibal lost count.

The Altmer leaped forward, his vision blurred and his mind numb. He grabbed the boy his hips and turned him around, so he could face him. Blood spatter across his pale face, on his sweaty dark curl, on his pulsing neck. Will looked at him with an unfocused gaze and he parted his lips, as if waiting, and let the knife fall to the ground with a clang. Hannibal pushed the boy against the wall, and it wasn't a kiss what followed, it was a bite, strong enough that he could have torn the flesh apart, but it didn't in the end, and Hannibal caught Will's jaw, sucked his lips and tasted his skin. Will moaned as Hannibal pressed him harder against the wall. He arched his back, raising his hips, asking for more, wanting to feel him. The boy was out of himself, with his dilatated pupils and his wanton moves, and Hannibal knew it, but couldn't stop himself. He touched him, everywhere, and pulled Will's hair, letting shameless sounds came out of his mouth.

The beggar was lying on the ground, his breathing heavy. A rattle, the sign of an upcoming death. Will stopped all of a sudden and pushed Hannibal a little. He focused on the Dunmer again, collected the knife and took a steady breath. His hands didn't tremble as he cut his throat.

Hannibal was still holding him, fingers gripping at his ribs, when Will lost his senses. He was fast enough not to let him hit the ground.

She arrived at the Dawnstar Sanctuary at the early hours, still wondering why she had decided to leave the safety of her headquarters to make that exhausting journey. She knew deep down how pointless it was and, for this, she had postponed the trip as long as possible, hoping to hear from Matthew, to see him coming back to her; he would have asked for forgiveness, and she would have granted it. But Bedelia waited in vain, and she didn't hear of Matthew for the whole week. That brat was, in all likelihood, already dead. Killed by his own recklessness. Still, his disappearance worked like a worm inside her head, biting, eating her

last scraps of her sanity. In the end, she had saddled her horse and left, with a name and a passphrase written in black ink on a piece of dirty paper.

She took slow and careful steps towards the Sanctuary, while she looked around, examining the place. She shivered, and it wasn't for the cold, which had no effect on her Nordic skin. She shivered, and it was for a fear that she couldn't control. She tried to hide better under her dark coat, and kept walking, listening attentively to the surrounding sounds.

The first thing that Bedelia noticed about the Dawnstar Sanctuary, now that she was at a close range, was its unsafety. The door left open allowed the entrance to everyone, for instance. Not to mention the lights, which let Bedelia see the interiors of the place: old hallways, ruined flags, something akin to a statue with horns.

The woman narrowed her eyes, trying to catch more details, while her hand grabbed the handle of the Blade of Woe. The statue seems to grow in height with every blink of Bedelia's eyes, and she caught her breath, tightening her grip.

It didn't take long for her to realize that it wasn't a statue, but a human figure or, more likely, an elvish one. He was carrying someone in his arms, and as they approached her, she recognized the golden hair, the pale gold hue of the skin, the pointed ears. The elegant posture.

"Hannibal!", she shouted, running towards him.

No horns on his head, she noticed, before turning her attention to the man in his arms. Hannibal held him tight against his chest, with a hand wrapped under his legs and the other supporting his back. The man's head swung at every step Hannibal made, but his eyes stayed closed.

"Is he...?" she started, but she couldn't keep going as she observed the way Hannibal stared at the boy with a worried frown painted on his face. He pulled him closer to breath in the scent of his sweaty curls, and Bedelia's chest ached because Hannibal cared as he had never done. He cared for someone who wasn't her. She reached her hand to caress his cheek, wipe away a tear, but she stopped it in mid air.

"Go away, Bedelia."

Only three words and he walked past her, as if those three words were enough. Hannibal's footprints left in the snow small stains of red. Bedelia turned towards the Sanctuary's entrance, but no one came out of it. She caught her breath.

"Where is Matthew? Where is the Dunmer?"

Hannibal kept walking but slowed his pace. Bedelia could see how his back got tense when she mentioned the name. He then stopped and turned his head, looking at her from over his shoulder.

"The Dunmer is dead."

Hannibal spoke with calm, his voice deeper than what Bedelia remembered. But there was a tremble in his voice, as if he was trying to hold back his rage. She stared at him with wide eyes, wanting to ask more questions. But in the end, she shut her mouth and waited. He started talking not long after that.

"Your Dunmer almost ruined my plan. He crossed a boundary when he should have minded his place. And I wonder, my dear Bedelia... Is this what you teach to your followers?"

"I do not have followers. I have brothers."

"Oh, that's not true, and you know it. You give orders, you are the leader. You don't see yourself as their equal."

Hannibal turned to face her and stepped closer, still holding the boy in his arms. "It was you who told the Dunmer about Will, isn't it?"

"I just..."

"You understood what he represented to me and you sent him to ruin everything."

Bedelia's heart almost stopped. She shook her head, short-breathed and shaking, now, like a leaf. "What did he represent to you, Hannibal?" she asked, and it took a lot of effort to phrase the question.

"To Sithis, he is the Spouse, the Blood Flower, destined to be the head of the Dark Brotherhood. He is Sithis' first Listener and, through his mouth, Sithis speaks to his children. To me, he is the one who will help me achieve my aim, although it's too soon for him to face the truth. To me, he is the one who will help me bring Sithis out of me."

"And what am I, then?"

"To me, you are nothing." Bedelia didn't make a sound, but couldn't arrest the tears streaming down her face. "But don't worry, Bedelia. You helped me, and I certainly won't forget that. I won't kill you for now. I'm heading towards Solitude, to report the death of Miss Vici's murderer. You should hide, Bedelia."

He resumed his walking, facing away. Bedelia kept shaking her head, in disbelief, and tried to follow him, but found out he couldn't.

"You can't, Hannibal! If you tell the Legion about the Brotherhood, it's over. I'll be in such a danger that you might as well kill me now."

"I might."

He disappeared in the dark. Bedelia heard his footsteps, but the sounds as well faded and left her alone, snow on his foot, tears on his face. He might have. But he didn't.

Morndas, morning

"So you're saying you don't remember anything about that night?"

Will shook his head. His mind was numb when he woke up that morning, laying on a soft bed between warm sheets. He had felt disoriented, and checked the environment because he could have sworn he had been in a Sanctuary minutes before, but now there was none of that humid air or the cold that had him shudder. When he had raised his head from the pillow, he had noticed a fire creeping up in the fireplace, as well as clean clothes on a chair near his bed.

He was in Castle Dour. His walls were still familiar to him, impressed in his mind, as its smell, of sweat and men. He had stood up and reached the hallway, to find someone who could give him an explanation. What had happened in the Sanctuary? He remembered a voice, calling him inside, and Hannibal behind him, and then...

His heart had almost skipped a beat when his mind brought back the image of Hannibal, and Winston with him, putting up a camp for them to stay the night in desolate places. Where was he? The hallway was empty. He had speeded up his pace, letting his steps resound, and tried to call Hannibal's name, with a voice rough from sleep and Gods knew what else, until a door had slammed open.

Jack's face was grievous, his eyes circled with tiredness and, perhaps, concern. He hadn't said a word when he had gestured Will to enter his office, and the boy didn't have the strength to ask him anything, afraid of what he could hear from the Colonel.

It had turned out the Dunmer, the author of Miss Vici's death as well as many others, was found dead inside the Sanctuary, with stabs wound in his abdomen, and a long cut on his throat. Will had passed out when he had seen his body, ("A reaction caused by your empathy," Jack had suggested), and had been unconscious since then.

"What about Hannibal?"

"Hannibal brought you here and told us what happened. He stayed with you, during the first night, but he left soon after, saying you were going to wake up in the next few days."

"He... left? Where did go?"

"I suppose he returned home. His job was done here. But he left something for you, in your room."

Will leaned back on the chair, struggling to remember something about Hannibal's presence in his room, but nothing came to his mind. He passed his fingers over his lips, let them rest there while thinking. His brain hurt.

"So who kill the Dunmer?"

"The Legion thinks he killed himself when he realized he was trapped."

"And what do you think?"

Jack sighed and narrowed his lips. "Look, there's something weird in this story. You two arrive here, covered in blood, you collapsed on the horse, and Hannibal... different."

"Different?"

"I don't know how to explain this. Maybe it was just my impression. After all, he had been studying about the Dark Brotherhood for years. I'm sure discovering the Sanctuary was a bit of a shock for him. Still, do you recall anything weird that happened during your journey?"

Will thought of his days with Hannibal, the stargazing, the delicious rabbit stews he had prepared for the both of us, his acquaintance with Winston, the encounter with the Mammoths. Will restrained a smile when Hannibal's shocked face he had pulled up that day emerged from his memory.

"Not really."

A knock on the door and a smooth female voice announced Alana's arrival. Jack let her enter the office, and he ducked his ducked his head, afraid of her possible outburst.

"I swear I was about to dismiss him, Alana."

The woman ran up to Will, his eyes wide with surprise; she probably didn't expect to see him awake in Jack's office. Will wondered if she didn't expect to see him awake at all.

She reached her hands to touch him, check if he was real and not a projection from the Oblivion. Her fingers brushed her jawline, and Will flinched. In all likeliness, a bruise formed there, but he hadn't had the chance to check his condition in the mirror.

"How are you feeling, Will? You should rest."

Will smiled and nodded, a little pleased by the caring tone of his voice. "I will," he said, and then to Jack: "but I'm afraid I must go."

He couldn't stay in Castle Dour for long, afraid of getting attached once again to the Legion, to a life of duty that was not for him. He belonged to the Winterhold College and there he would have returned. Jack, deep down, knew it and didn't protest. Alana opened her mouth to say something, but Will caressed her hair and, without a word, got back to his room.

He found Hannibal's gift on the nightstand where, for some reason, he hadn't laid his eyes on when he had woken up hours before. It was a satchel; heavy, Will noticed, when he took it in his hands. Inside, the biggest gemstone Will had ever seen, something fancy and expensive that only Hannibal could have bought. On a piece of paper, he had scribbled with an elegant handwriting:

To make up for the inadequacy of my last gift,

Morndas, evening

"I can see your horns!". There was a laugh in Abigail's voice, as she raised her hand and reached to Hannibal's head, caressing his golden hair. She sat in his lap, no restraints in her display of affection, and he reveled in her touch; he would have purred if he could, pleased to be revered this way. Of course there weren't any horns, but it was a well-welcomed reminder of what he had experienced days before. Hannibal patted her head and hummed in delight.

"Tell me more about your adventure, Hannibal, please!"

"I have already told you everything, my dear."

"But what about your fellow? You speak so fondly of him. Am I going to meet him? Am I going to taste him?"

Hannibal narrowed his eyes, as he grabbed her from her hips to move her aside. He stood up then, to pour a glass of wine for himself. "Will Graham is not for eating," he chastised her.

"What, why not? You always say that to eat someone is to honor them."

"And I still remain of the opinion, my dear. Will Graham, though, is... special."

He could see Abigail's insolent eyes from the rim of his glass of wine, her mouth half parted and ready to say something improper. "But have no fear, my little one," he added. "I am planning a feast, and it will be splendid. The menu is already decided."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so: this is the end of the first part of the story. I can't believe it I wrote *this* much. I still remember planning the story back in November, certain that I would never go past the first chapter, but here I am. Needless to say, there are still things I need to tell you about Will and Hannibal in Skyrim, the story isn't over at all. Let's be honest: do you really think Bedelia will accept so easily her defeat? NO WAY.

I'll update the next chapter as soon as possible and, in the meantime, I'll work on the previous ones and try to edit them a bit. I won't change the story, of course, but I'll remind you about the edits next time anyway.
Thank you for your lovely support and don't forget to leave a comment!

P.S. I'm still terrible at this. Argh, writing.
P.P.S. *THEY KISSED!!*

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!